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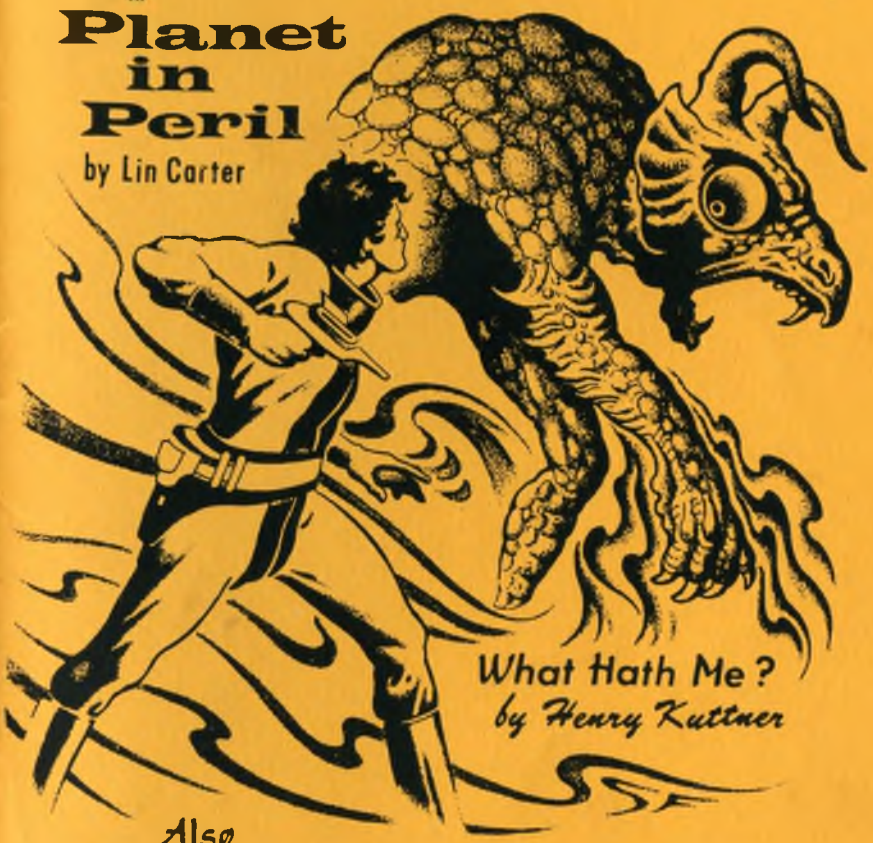
...Tales of Scientifiction

ASTRO-Adventures

☆Star Pirate battles the murder monsters of Mercury in

Planet in Peril

by Lin Carter



What Hath Me?
by Henry Kuttner

Also

Monorail to Eternity by Carl Jacobi

Number Four * April 1988

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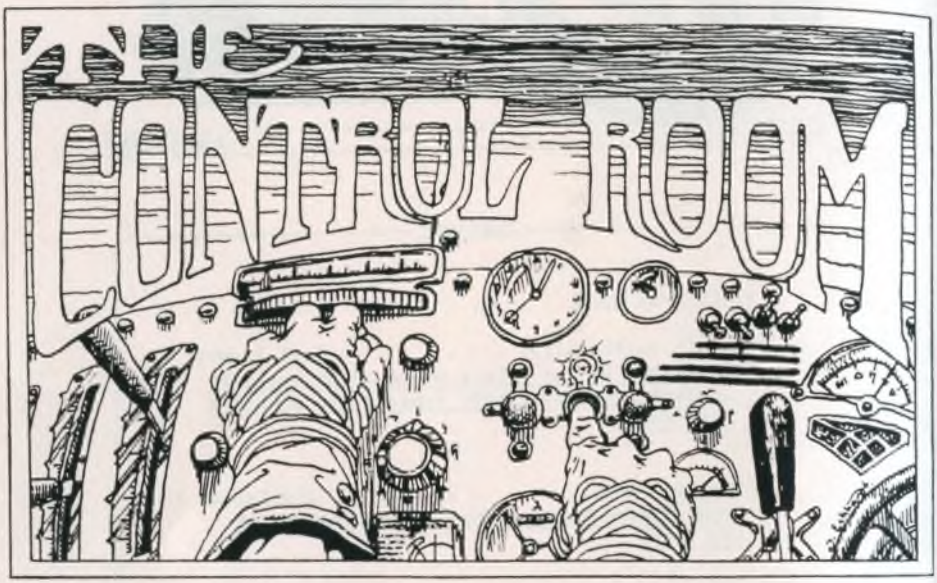

We've got quite a crew assembled here for our latest madcap mission into make-believe mayhem! Me, I'm Captain Astro, and my trusty crew of raygun-slingers are just itching to see some extraterrestrial action. Let me introduce you. First off, there's Carl Jacobi, veteral of pulps from Startling Stories to Comet Science Fiction, bringing you this time another atom-smashing epic from his old space-trunk, "Monorail to Eternity." Then galactic goodguy Lin Carter fires off another swashbuckle starring Star Pirate, today's man of tomorrow, this one called "Planet in Peril." Rollicking rocketeer Jason Rainbow contributes "Zeppelins of the Void," a tale first written some years back for the ill-starred pulp Spicy Zeppelin Stories before that mag folded. Alas! Finally, our terrific "Tales from the Time-Warp" features Henry Kuttner's "What Hath Me?," a neglected classic from Planet Stories. Thanks to space-hounds Robert Weinberg who suggested this one and Dan Gobbett who dredged up a copy for us! With a team like this, I'm sure you'll agree that Astro-Adventures #4 is just the secret weapon we need to save the universe from the clutches of scheming aliens and plotting mad scientist masterminds! Will you join us?

Captain Astro

MONORAIL TO ETERNITY

by Carl Jacobi

Condemned by the Rulers of an alien world to endless, aimless flight beneath the planet's surface!

My Lord Chancellor was a pitiless man, hawkfaced, with little gimlet eyes that gazed upon me with bored complacency. He took a pinch of azaf in his high gilded box overlooking the Royal Mercurian Court and waved me forward. A moment later I stood on the dais for the condemned as a hush fell over the courtroom.

"Prisoner, you have been tried and found guilty of treason against the Oligarchy of Mercury. Have you anything to say?"

Tense, dry-lipped, I looked up into that bland face in silence. The Chancellor languidly brushed his lips with a plum-colored kerchief.

"I sentence you to thirty years on the monorail, and may the horrors of The Core lead you to repentance for your crime."

Thirty years! What mockery of trial was this that could condemn a man for something he did not understand, let alone commit? Blind rage seized me. I gripped the rail and shook my fist. "I'm innocent!" I shouted. "Innocent, do you hear?"

The Chancellor regarded me emotionlessly and nodded again. Hands

gripped my arms. Two saffon-clad guards dragged me out of the court-room, now a babel of confusion, down a corridor and into a narrow cubile at the far end. One of the guards said,

"You leave in an hour. If you have any last messages to write, do it now."

The door thudded shut, and an overhead light went on, bathing the cubicle in a merciless violet glare. I slumped down on the bare settee and buried my head in my hands. Thirty years . . .!

It wasn't possible. All this must be some wild dream from whose phantasmagoria I would awake presently to laugh at my fears. But no, the bare fibrex walls, the glaring light attested only too well to reality. Nervous reaction came then, and I sat there in a kind of stupor, conscious only of the hammering of my heart.

At the end of half an hour I got up, drank a cup of water from the urn on the table and took hold of myself. In slow deliberate retrospection I went over each detail of this passing chain of events, vainly seeking an answer to it all.

My name is Mark Dainley. I was born on Earth of Earth parentage, but moved at an early age to this planet nearer the sun. My father was a Salvage-Ratio clerk, class 3, which is to say he had advanced as far as he could in the complicated social strata of this shadow-belt civilization. In 3412 my father died, and being the eldest son, I followed custom and took over his position in the governmental Bureau of Standards.

For ten years I worked in this manner, and although I had once vowed I would never be shackled by the monotony which the Mercurian overlords imposed on their citizens, I gradually found myself settling down into my accepted social groove. At the age of thirty-five I was still a bachelor. I lived alone in a third-tier apartment in the capital city of Umbra, and my only entertainment was my books.

Up until that time I had nursed a promise that as soon as my savings were sufficient I would quit Mercury, take passage on one of the liners and begin anew on Mars or Venus where freedom still prevailed. But in 3437 the Residence Manifesto was proclaimed, forbidding any citizen to leave the planet, and I realized my future was sealed.

This then was my life until twenty-six days ago.

In the Bureau of Standards it was my work to correlate the daily reports of the various utility organizations throughout the city. One morning as I was laboriously going through a stack of registries I came upon a square sheet of blue paper. In the upper left corner was the printed design of a comet against the background of a double circle. And across the middle of the sheet was written: M. DAINLEY, YOUR APPLICATION HAS BEEN ACCEPTED. STAND BY FOR ORDERS.

Though I must confess to having paid little attention to the visi reports during recent months, the significance of that design suddenly struck me hard. It was the emblem for the Club of Revolt, a vague and shadowy society dedicated in some uncertain way to the overthrow of the Oligarchy. Who were its leaders or members, no one knew, but the government had issued stern warnings against anyone possessing or distributing its literature.

And yet this paper bore my name. What did it mean?

A fellow clerk came forward then, and I thrust the paper aside. But on the morrow, hidden as before in a stack of reports was a second message. Here again I saw my name and read: PROCEED ACCORDING TO PLAN AND ADVISE US ACCORDINGLY.

It is strange what a man, confronted by something he doesn't un-

derstand, will do. By all manner of logic I should have reported the matter to the Chief Technician. Or failing that, I should have destroyed the papers. I did neither. I placed them in an envelope and hid that envelope in an inner drawer of my desk.

In this fashion six different communications made their appearance. It was as I was reading the last that a shadow fell over my desk, and I looked up to face the accusing eye of the Chief Technician.

The rest is confusion. I remember but vaguely the details of my arrest. All my denials were sneered at, and when in stubborn defiance I refused to procure a defense-pleader, one was appointed for me by the state.

That trial ran the gamut of hysterical oratory. The six messages were exhibited as evidence. But more than that--and here I could only close my eyes and wonder--witness after witness came forward to verify treasonable remarks which the inquisitors put in my mouth.

Now at length it was over with a single detail clear in my mind. I was but a key in a larger plan still shrouded in secrecy.

The door opened and the guards stood before me.

We went through the corridor and out the main ramp into the streets of Umbra. At the curb I halted a moment gazing up at the crystalline dome which cupped the city. Nostalgia seized me. With all its evils Mercury was the only home I could remember. There were the cube-shaped buildings with their flying buttresses and elliptical roofs. There were the first, second and third tier runways carrying their network of traffic, most of it converging on the space-port to the east. A hundred yards from the courtbuilding stood the triangular tower that marked the shaft leading to The Core. Here one of the guards touched a stud on an upright panel. A section of the arkite wall slid open, revealing an iron cage suspended from a cable.

We took our places, and with a lurch the cage began to descend, slowly at first, then with breath-taking speed. Blood pounded at my temples and my stomach reeled with nausea. Enclosed lifts with hydro-auricular stabilizers were of course common to Umbra, but no such luxuries were afforded the prisoners.

An hour--a nightmare hour--passed before the cage jarred to a standstill before a lighted platform. In a chained-off area were some two dozen prisoners, prisoners like myself guilty of offenses against the government. The majority were second and third class Earthmen, but a few were Venusians, and three were wafer-headed high-caste Martians. Each bore the look of despair and resignation that I knew must be mirrored by my own face. Saffron-clad dragoons looked on stoically.

But the thing that caught my gaze was the long tube-shaped monster drawn up at the edge of the platform --the monorail in which I was to make endless circumnavigations of Mercury fifty miles beneath its crust. Like a segmented bullet it extended on beyond the platform, fashioned of lustreless black zorodium, with heavy blinds drawn over each port.

As I stepped onto the platform the dragoons unfastened the chains, and I found myself drawn along with the others to the entrance panel of the first coach. We went through that panel in groups of two, and the prisoner who accompanied me was a girl. For a brief instant her eyes met mine--dark, hazel eyes set in a young oval face. Then she was pacing down the aisle ahead of me.

The interior of that mobile prison was grey throughout, save the ceiling which was black. There was a single row of chair-seats running down the left side, grouped in two's, a curtained port between each. A swinging bar, fastened on a swivel, would,

when locked into position, prevent the prisoner from moving.

An instant later the entrance panel slid shut, and the monorail started. My thirty-year journey had begun!

II

Those first hours were agony. Dully I sat there, living over again the grueling hours of my trial, the earlier bewildering events of my arrest. There was no sensation of speed, only a gentle swaying and a dull vibration of the wheels above on the overhead rail. No conversation broke the silence of the coach. The prisoners sat like wooden images, staring blankly ahead of them.

In the seat opposite me was the girl I had noticed on entering the coach. She was dark-haired and slender, and she was dressed modishly in a tweed cape-tunic with a rakish short cap set jauntily on her head. And then I saw the blue star on her cape lapel.

"You're a newspaperwoman," I said. "In heaven's name, what are you doing here?"

She started a little and regarded me dully. "What are any of us doing here?"

"But you wear the blue star of the press, which means you're beyond the jurisdiction of the Oligarchy."

A wan smile touched her lips. "I thought so too. But nothing, it seems, is beyond the jurisdiction of the Oligarchy, especially when the charge is murder."

I thought that over and studied her more closely. "At least you don't look like a criminal."

Again she smiled, and this time some of the bitterness left her eyes. She opened her purse, took out a Martian cigarette and lit it slowly.

"Thank you for that. My claims of innocence have been ridiculed so often I'm afraid I've become a cynic. I do know enough of the passenger list here, however, to say that you can't type an individual by his looks. With all its iron-bound regulations, Mercury has fostered some of the worst criminals in the System. That Martian over there, for example, looks gentle enough. Yet he slit the throats of two crewmen, attempting to escape this planet by stowing away on a space freighter."

I had an impulse to recite all the details of my own case. Yet somehow in these surroundings, all talk of the past seemed futile. I said simply,

"My term is thirty years."

She nodded. "Perhaps one can learn to adjust himself to a life without future, without hope. I don't know."

At the far end of the car the panel opened, and a little old man entered. From prisoner to prisoner he made his way, engaging each in a long conversation, making notes in a small black book. At length he stood before us.

"I'm the monitor," he said. "I'll have to ask you a few questions. Name, class, occupation?"

I answered him mechanically, and the girl said, "Jamaica Lee, press-reporter, Class 2, Umbra-News-Visi, morning edition."

He looked like a grey-haired mannikin with his trimmed Van Dyke and his blue uniform. There was a friendliness in his eyes, a look of sincerity about his broad brow and wide mouth.

"The primary thing for you to do," he said quietly, "is to train yourselves to accept all the horrors of your new surroundings objectively. Life on the monorail will not be pleasant; in fact, it will be quite terrible. Make no mistake," he added. "I'm a prisoner myself, and today marks my fifteenth year in The Core."

He closed his book and passed a hand over his eyes wearily.

"The government demands I give the following information to each prisoner. The Core was first dis-

covered in 2096 by the creator of the first Oligarchy, Jargas Quay. It lies approximately fifty miles beneath Mercury's crust and has been divided into five districts: the Zones of Silence, Sound, Heat, Cold, and Shadows. We are now passing through the Zone of Silence, and during that time you will be restricted to this coach. Later you may have freedom of the monorail.

"Of the five zones, only two, that of Silence and Sound, have been explored. The greater part of The Core is a vast morass, teeming with the most horrible forms of life in the lower cycle of the evolutionary scale. The overhead rail upon which this train runs is, of course, suspended from the Dome and was constructed by boring shafts through from the outer crust. Power is formed by solar-condensers, passed down through conduits from the sunward side of Mercury. To replenish it, the monorail stops once each day at a power station, and there also the exterior of each coach is sluiced down. While the monorail is in a power station, you will be fastened to your seats.

"I need not warn you that any attempt at escape not only would be foolhardy but quite useless. In the vestibule between each coach are two armed dragoons who will shoot on sight any passengers attempting to leave. Besides that, it is doubtful if you could go more than fifty yards without being devoured by the monsters that live in the swamps or attacked by the Gnarbies."

I got a cheroot out of my pocket, ran my tongue over the end and lit it. I said,

"What are the Gnarbies?"

He scowled. "The Gnarbies are the intelligent form of aboriginal life found in The Core. Intelligent, yet in violation of all sociological laws, they lack a common means of communication. They're individualists in the exact sense of the word, each developing his mental powers independent of his fellows. It's a good thing they can't be united, for if they were, there's no telling what they might do. As it is, however, they make your civilization on the outer crust possible."

Jamaica Lee looked up. "Just what do you mean by that?"

The oldster stroked his beard. "Has it never occurred to you that those enormous heat and cold moderation units and the gravitors which are a part of every domed metropolis on this planet do not operate by themselves? The trouble with you is you live in a civilization that recognizes only a middle or second class at the bottom of its ladder. The slave labor--the Gnarbies--is a concealed entity, existing like a cancer under your social veneer."

His soft modulated voice had held me in close attention. I leaned back and sucked deliberately a moment. I said,

"What do you know of the Club of Revolt?"

He stiffened. The color flowed out of his face and a gleam of latent fear entered his eyes. Slowly he returned his book to his pocket.

"My name is Floy. Ephraim Floy. Whenever you want me, the call bell is just over your head."

III

On through the blackness and the silence the monorail bored its way. Only the presence of the girl, Jamaica Lee, kept me from venting my emotions. She too was living on the last strand of nerve endurance, and in an effort to surround ourselves with an aura of false courage, we talked endlessly those first hours. She told me of her family which like mine had migrated from Earth, of her schooling, of her many and varied experiences as a reporter. There was something pathetic and at the same time terribly rational in her attempt to maintain poise

and restraint in the face of the incredible disaster that faced her. Yet her indomitable will was evident in her every movement. At length sheer weariness claimed both of us, and I leaned back and closed my eyes.

I awoke with all hell in my ears. My first impression was that the coach had been wrecked; then I saw Jamaica Lee calmly stuffing bits of cotton in her ears from a first aid kit in her purse.

The Zone of Sound!

The air was choked with screams and cries as of a thousand souls in distress, with grindings, gratings and cracklings like titanic bottles breaking under heat--all blended into a hideous cacophony that grew steadily louder.

The other passengers had come to life now. They had wrapped scarves and torn strips of clothing about their heads; one or two were sobbing softly.

For a quarter of an hour the uproar continued. Gradually the last shriek faded into the distance and silence returned. The swaying of the coach lessened, and a moment later ceased altogether.

Jamaica Lee said, "We've stopped."

The panel at the far end opened, and two dragoons strode down the aisle, locking the swivel bars in place before each passenger. The overhead lights went out. Beyond the port shadowy figures of workmen hurried back and forth. Abruptly a loud swish sounded, and the quartz became a miniature waterfall.

"It's the power station," Jamaica Lee said. "They're sluicing down the cars. Remember?"

Floy's explanation came back to me, but it didn't make sense. Why should the Oligarch officials be so concerned over the otuward appearance of the prison train as to wash the exterior of the coaches every day? And then in the half darkness someone tapped me on the shoulder. The Monitor.

"I saw you take out your watch a few minutes ago," he said. "May I see it again?"

"My watch?" Puzzled, I took out my magno timepiece, a gift from my father, and handed it across. Floy examined its inscription closely.

"Was your father Philip Dainley?"

I nodded. Floy stroked his beard slowly. "That's very interesting," he said. "Now one thing more. I note by the roster that you're here on a charge of espionage. Suppose you tell me about it."

"There's nothing to tell," I said.

He was silent a moment. "Perhaps not. Perhaps on the other hand it would help to get things off your chest."

I thought it over, and I began to talk, and I didn't skip the details. Bitterness flowed from my lips. When I had finished the sweat of anger was on my face. Floy peered at me through the gloom with new interest.

He turned now to Jamaica Lee. "The roster says you were convicted on a charge of murder in connection with the Senlow case. Is that right?"

The girl nodded.

"Details?" said Floy.

She hesitated. "I'm a reporter and I was the last person seen with Senlow before his death. Senlow was an unprincipled scoundrel, and he deserved to die, but I didn't kill him."

For several moments Floy stood there digesting this information. Then he swung on his heel and retreated through the connecting panel. But a moment later he was back, eyes glinting with excitement.

"I'm giving you a chance," he said. "Maybe I'm a fool, but I don't think so. Listen. We stay here fifteen minutes more. In three minutes go through the panel into the vestibule. Wait there five minutes. Then go through the next five coaches. In the vestibule between the fifth and sixth coach you will find a ladder and a hatch leading to the

roof. Once there you must find a way to the ground floor. Keep low until the power station lights go off, then follow the overhead rail."

I felt a hand reach out and grasp mine. Then he was gone, shuffling down the aisle.

Jamaica Lee stirred uneasily. "Can we trust him?"

Trust or not, it was our only chance. I took out my watch, counted three minutes by the luminous dial, then rose quietly, pushed aside the unlocked swivel bar and led the girl toward the rear panel.

We waited a moment, then stepped into the swaying vestibule. Two dragoons, one on each side, had their backs to us, and they didn't turn.

Again, following Floy's instructions, I waited tensely. With Jamaica Lee following, I entered the next coach.

Confusion greeted us as we made our way down the aisle. Here was the captured underworld of Mercury, all the tide and wash of the outer crust. Here were bland-faced confidence men, carmine-lipped women-of-the-streets, sniveling space rats from the limehouse districts of Umbra and Rocket City. Groups sat together playing cards. A blue-haired Venusian girl with a dress cut daringly low winked at me brazenly.

We reached the vestibule between the fifth and sixth coaches without interruption. Outside the sluicing down operation continued. I gripped the girl's hand.

"Still game?"

She nodded. We mounted the ladder, passed through the hatch and emerged onto the roof of the coach. Directly above all was blackness, but on the right a triple shaft of violet light played on the train, revealing intermittent towers with jets of spraying water. A curtain of fine mist swirled over us.

For an eternity we crouched there. The air was warm with the strange earthy smell one finds in underground places. Then abruptly behind us quick steps sounded, and with a sinking feeling I remembered I had forgotten to close the hatch. An instant later a shadow was outlined against the light, and a dragoon leaped upon the roof.

He stood there blinking. He saw me, jerked his heat pistol to aim and fired pointblank, but the charge went wild. I kicked myself forward, seized his gun-wrist and twisted with every ounce of strength I possessed. The man screamed. I bludgeoned my fist into his jaw, and he slumped down in a heap.

But the report and the flash of his heat gun had not gone unnoticed. Inside the coach below me an alarm bell began to tocsin wildly. Hollow and muffled I heard shouted commands.

I said to the girl, "We'll have to jump it."

There was an arelium steel gutter encircling the lip of the coach wall. I gripped it with one hand, swung the girl out in space with the other and then let myself go. Even as my feet jarred on the ground, heavy hands entwined themselves about my throat. Panting, a voice said,

"Prison swine! For this your term will be life."

I brought my knee up into his midsection, and I struck out savagely with my fist. He delivered a blow low down in my vitals that sent a wave of nausea surging through me. I struck again, and this time his head cracked against the coach wall, and I felt him slide slowly downward senseless.

And now all was confusion. The water jets went off, and a revolving stola light began to sweep in a wide ellipse overhead, bathing us in a white glare. Down the length of the monorail three dragoons pounded toward us, firing as they came. A heat charge seared across my arm.

But as I stood there in that split second of indecision I saw three things. Ten feet beyond the right-

of-way was a short declivity at the bottom of which yawned black water. At my side within arms' reach was a white segmented tower with a looping crossbar that ran longitudinally toward the front of the monorail. At the bottom of that tower was a heavy switch and a red letter placard that read: EMERGENCY.

The oncoming dragoons fired again. I gave Jamaica Lee a violent shove, catapulting her over the declivity into the water.

I reached forward and slammed down hard that switch.

The effect was electric. Manhigh on the walls of each coach trapboards sprang open and a brace of sub-sonic vibra-guns ran out. Somewhere a siren burst into a deafening scream. The lights went out, and the monorail began to grind forward.

I heard cries of profanity and a rush of steps as the dragoons raced to board the train. The overhead rail began to sing as the coaches gathered momentum. Came a rush of wind, a last wail of the siren, and we were alone in silence and blackness.

IV

The water was warm and seemed to have an adhesive quality as it swirled gently about my body. It smelled of rotting vegetation, and the bottom was a clinging ooze that quivered under my feet. At my side Jamaica Lee laughed tremulously.

"That's no way to treat a lady. Are we safe now?"

"Not yet." My magno watch pulsed audibly in my pocket; save for that and the purling of the water there was no sound for ten long minutes. Then across at the power station the lights went on again, and a line of workmen began to file like automatons across the ramp to a barracks-like structure at the far end.

Workmen, yes, but not Earthmen, not Mercurians. They were short undersized creatures, white of body, clad in a kind of plastic envelope. Their faces were featureless, yet featureless in a caricature-like way that emphasized each bulging distortion. There was something utterly malignant about them, and as they walked in groups of two, conversing loudly, I noted that there was no sign of understanding on the part of one pair for another. The girl at my side moved closer.

"The Gnarbies," she said. "The people of The Core."

A bullet-headed Earthman strode at the end of the column, flicking a ramba whip. The last of the procession filed through the barracks door, and the Earthman overseer slammed the barrier closed and ran a heavy bar across it. He turned then, discarded the whip for a heat pistol and began to advance under the light cautiously.

I linked my hand in the girl's and edged forward through the roily water. A dozen yards, and we came upon a narrow but deep sluiceway that apparently was a run-off for the excess water used in washing the monorail. Even as I moved into it, I puzzled again over the motive behind such a washing procedure.

Heads down, we followed the sluiceway to its far end where a series of smaller channels radiated spoke-like from a central hub. We stood still listening to the diminuendo of the overseer's steps.

"It's now or never," I said.

I braced myself against a low abutment, climbed to the ground level and pulled the girl up after me. For a single instant we were outlined there in the glare, and that instant was almost fatal. Opposite the barracks the overseer wheeled and fired twice in quick succession. He missed, but one of the charges burned a black streak across the collar of Jamaica Lee's cape-tunic. Caution to the winds, we raced into the blackness.

It was like plunging into a bot-

tomless well. Blindly we ran, expecting any minute to blunder into some unseen obstacle. At the end of five minutes I knew from the girl's hoarse breathing that she could go no farther, and we dropped to our knees, listening.

There was no sign of pursuit. Behind us the lights of the power station were tiny candles against a velvet backdrop. Presently they were extinguished, and the darkness was complete.

Not quite complete. Ahead of us, far off near the limit of my vision, I thought I detected a vague glow reaching up toward the Dome of The Core. All was still save for the purling of water somewhere on either side.

"Listen," I said to the girl, "we're in a fix proper. We can't go back there and follow the overhead rail as Floy, the monitor, advised. And we can't go on like this."

She made no reply, and I heard her moving back and forth.

"Come over here," she said abruptly. "Look at that distant glow and tell me what you see."

I strained my eyes a long time. "Nothing. It might be a man-made light and then again it might not. We're too far away to tell."

"But don't you see the beam?"

There was a single ray radiating from that glow like a violet thread stretched across the blackness. I had taken it at first for a trick of my eyes. Now, as I moved to the right, I saw that beam slowly widen. A few steps to the left, and it disappeared.

"A direction-beam," I said. "We follow it and we stay on firm ground. Let's go."

We slogged forward again on what seemed a floating mat of compressed vegetation. At times we sank to our knees in clinging ooze; our bodies were bathed in perspiration. Life was all around us, the alien sub-evolutionary life of The Core. Velvet-winged shadows brushed our faces. Plant tentacles uttered strange mewling cries as we trod on them. Once I heard a slow heavy pulsation like an exposed heart, beating on the surface of the black water.

I got the impression that we were traversing a slender aisle whose boundaries for some reason were inviolable and that on either side unspeakable horrors watched us hungrily as we passed.

Ahead the distant glow grew brighter. Now its illumination had reached up to the very Dome, and on that arched ceiling I could see fantastic murals in kaleidoscopic pastel with double and triple perspectives. At that height and in that vague radiance their outlines were deceptive, but I knew that they were what had been left behind by the ancient Mercurians who had lived here before migrating to the outer crust.

There was no need of the beam now; it had in fact disappeared; the light was everywhere, a blue-tinted effulgence that seemed to continue to infinity. The aisle ended abruptly. We were on firm footing with the jungle behind us. Here was a rolling landscape, marked by intermittent low rolling hills and dotted at intervals with the spongy pod-shaped Telutia trees of Venus and the red geometric bush of Mars.

"A lot of transplanting work," I said to Jamaica Lee. "These growths aren't wild."

Proceeding slowly, we went on another quarter mile, and then the girl drew up abruptly. A man was sauntering toward us, a man out of the pages of a history book. He was twentieth-century Earth in every detail: a loose-fitting suit of tweed, an outlandish ribbon about his throat I remembered they called a cravat or tie, a cap and a cane. He came along swinging the cane, and he said, "Cheerio."

When he was abreast of us I looked him over deliberately. An Earthman,

born on Mercury beyond a doubt. The markings were there: the transparent lustre to the skin, the slightly elongated ears, the crisp wiry quality to the hair.

"Cheerio," he said again, smiling as if this were the most ordinary meeting. "I see you made it so far."

"Made what?" I had my fists clenched in my pockets, and I kept my eyes on that cane.

He smiled. "Why, your escape from the monorail, of course."

The impact of his words left me stunned. I stood there foolishly a moment, then seized him by the shoulder. "Waht do you mean?"

He only laughed shortly. "Don't get excited, my friends. I'm not going to report you. In fact, as you can see there isn't anyone here to report you to. I simply deduced an obvious fact. You see, you must have come from the monorail because you wear no zone badge and because you are strangers."

His entire manner was so disarming that I relaxed my grip. He took from his pocket a Martian gorea pipe, which apparently was still burning, for he began to smoke in great gusts.

"Tell me," he said, "who helped you escape? Was it Ephraim Floy?"

As I continued to glare at him in silence, he nodded again and chuckled. "Yes, I suppose it was Floy. We've suspected him for a long time, but never got around to doing anything about it.

"I'm Said Valcour, assistant Resident of this Zone," he continued.

Jamaica Lee, who had said nothing during this exchange of conversation, came forward now and looked at me.

"What do you think, Mark?"

"I don't know," I said. "This may be a trick. See if he has any weapons."

A quick search of his outlandish clothing revealed nothing save credentials that proved beyond a doubt the position he had claimed. Said Valcour offered no resistance at all to the search. He seemed amused by it.

"And now," he said briskly when we had finished, "enough of this foolishness. You may as well forget that I'm your prisoner, for without the information I can give you, you won't go two miles without being caught."

He stepped between us, linked his arms in the girl's and mine and began to move forward in an easy distance-eating stride. As he walked, he began a rapid-fire soliloquy.

"You were told," he said, "that The Core is all jungle and miasma and horrible monsters. As far as half of it goes, that's true enough, but away from the path of the monorail lies a district that's habitable enough and comparatively--I say comparatively--free from danger. The Gnarbies, some of whom you must have seen by now, are the natives here. But there is still an older race, the descendants of the first Mercurians who remained behind in The Core when the great majority of their fellows migrated to the outer crust.

"They number today less than a thousand, and to a man they are devoted to the science of research. The Oligarchy discovered their presence a long time ago and soon realized that they had a much higher intelligence quotient than their own. Accordingly they placed them in bondage, forced them to spend the greater part of their lives discovering and developing new labor-saving techniques for the benefit of life on the outer crust."

"But," I interrupted, "I thought the Gnarbies were the slave labor here. Floy said . . ."

Said Valcour nodded. "That is true. The Gnarbies are the machinery, the old Mercurians the guiding force, and the Oligarchs the single operating unit. The system has worked only because all factories and technical plants on the outer crust have kept sealed doors to the public. The Oligarchs fostered the idea that their civilization had reached a state of machine-perfection wherein all humdrum duties were robot-oper-

ated. Whereas . . ."

"Whereas," Jamaica Lee said, "life there was in one of the oldest social states in System history, feudalism."

Again Valcour nodded. He paced on a few yards in silence, puffing his pipe furiously.

"House of cards that it is, the system has succeeded so far because of two major reasons. First, the Gnarbies are individualists, without even a common form of communication. And second, through a process of time the old Mercurians have developed into a communal state that acts entirely as a group."

I said, "That's not possible. No society, however well organized, can . . ."

He smiled. "Isn't it? In a moment I'll show you."

We had been climbing a high rise that grew steadily steeper as we advanced. Abruptly we topped its summit, and I found myself looking down into a narrow valley. Looking, I say, while my jaw dropped in astonishment.

Stretching the length of the valley was a triple row of rectangular platforms, fashioned of white carponium. In the center of each platform was a white grand piano; not the modern magnafonic device found in the homes of the upper classes on the outer crust, but the ancient instrument of the masters, copied from Earth models. Seated before each piano was a white-robed Mercurian.

Presently, like a vast machine, those hundreds of pianos began to play. It was hollow booming music thrown back in discordant harmonies by the Dome, but it was synchronized and precise as a metronome.

Jamaica Lee looked down on the scene with flashing eyes. "In heaven's name, what does it mean?"

Said Valcour knocked the dottle from his pipe and restored it to his pocket.

"It means," he said, "that those are the old Mercurians, and they're in the midst of their rest period. I told you they act as a unit. Now watch."

For several minutes the music continued. Then it ended in a series of final chords. The Mercurians turned as one man, descended from their platforms and filed like a column of infantry toward a low rectangular structure half hidden in a cleft of the hills.

"You see?" Valcour said. "They're refreshed now from their few moments of playing, and they'll return to their labors with new vigor."

I looked at the girl and at the assistant Resident, and I scowled. What sort of world was this with life not only alien but in contradiction to all accepted rules of existence?

"Look," I said. "It's about time for a showdown. Where are you taking us?"

Valcour started to reply, but his gaze strayed upward, and his words clipped off half way. A look of fear entered his face. He leveled a finger over our heads.

"The Garaldas!"

He threw himself into a deep fissure that ran zigzag down the incline. Simultaneously I was conscious of an approaching deep-pitched drone like the hum of a thousand hornets. High up near the roof of the muraled Dome a greenish shadow raced toward us with lightning speed.

Without further question, the girl and I leaped into the fissure and ran headlong down its length until an overcropping slab of plinth hid us from sight. Said Valcour said,

"Keep down."

I watched that shadow as it came. It was a dense flying formation of winged bird-like creatures with long double appendages trailing out behind. Their heads were crowned with long waving blonde hair, and fastened firmly in the claws of each was a round container that caught the light and glistened. Something must have

aroused their suspicions, for they halted their forward flight to drop lower and circle above us several times. With hoarse squawking cries they wheeled again and passed on overhead.

Valcour heaved a sigh of relief. "Luck," he said. "If they have recognized you two as strangers I would have had some explaining to do."

"What are they?" Jamaica Lee said.

"I told you. Garaldas. Technically sub-Ithiospathia. They're the patrol force of The Core and one of the strongest weapons the Oligarchy wields."

We moved on again, climbed and descended two more hillocks. Then in the distance a towering building loomed up before us. It was an H-shaped structure with two enormous wings on either side and an open plaisance in the center. Before it stretched a broad park dotted with geometric bush and Telutia trees.

"The Residency," Valcour said, waving his hand before him.

The scene under the soft light looked strangely peaceful and quiet. Yet surrounding the park I could see the low battlements of an impenetration wall; and flanking either side of a broad central gate were two vibra-cannon.

We moved down the rise toward that gate. Reaching it, we faced a sentry who saluted as he recognized Valcour. The assistant Resident said casually,

"District lieutenants from Zone 3 on an official visit to the Resident."

The sentry nodded, pressed a stud on an upright panel. The gate folded back.

We went down a broad avenue of the park for a hundred yards until an intervening fringe of trees hid us from sight of the gate. Valcour then struck off into the grounds and approached the left wing of the Residency. A series of ramps now made their appearance. Valcour turned into the second and led the way to a small door opening on the side. Through this we passed to find ourselves in a small automatic lift. Mechanism hummed, and we shot upwards. A moment later Valcour opened a panel and ushered us into a large chamber.

The room was sumptuously furnished. There were soft volpan rugs on the floor, divans and eash chairs. The walls were artistically decorated with Zelti etchings and at the far wall stood a handsome book-cabinet equipped with a synchronized read-timing device.

Valcour motioned us to chairs and sat down before us.

"As you must now understand," he said, "it will be necessary for you to pose as officials from a neighboring zone. There are quite a number of details to take care of and things you will have to commit to memory to complete the role. You must know, for example, the conditions in the zone from which you supposedly come. You must be acquainted with various colloquialisms which we officials employ in governmental matters. Also we'll have to fix up some visa papers for you."

I shoved my hands deep in my pockets and looked him over from head to foot. I said,

"Just where do you figure in all this?"

Valcour leaned back and smiled. "You don't trust me?" he said. "Well, I'm not sure I would if I were in your position either. Suppose we call it a personal matter, a private affair of my own. Suppose you'd been in The Core for six years, serving as assistant Resident. Suppose you were the logical persion in line for the Resident's position when that office was suddenly left open. And suppose another man with far less ability wormed his way into the graces of powerful over-officials and snatched the position right out of your hands. What would you do?"

As I said nothing, Valcour made fists of his hands. "Some men might take that lying down. I'm not like

that. I figure that when the Oligarch officials learn Resident Sargent has failed to capture two escaped monorail prisoners, the administration here will break wide open. By that time you will be well on your way back to the outer crust, of course. But it will pave the way for me to prove my worth and the lack of ability on the part of my superior." He got to his feet. "And now to work."

Valcour proved an excellent instructor. Politics, geography, history and odds and ends of information, all of which gave me an insight into some of the mysteries of The Core. When finally he was satisfied he had given us all the essential facts, he moved across to a desk and busied himself with stylus and dal-paper. A moment later he handed us two documents.

"Your visas," he said. "Not too good, but they'll pass a quick inspection."

He opened the door then and led us to another automatic lift. We rode up two more stories and found ourselves in a broad chamber, one side of which was formed entirely by tall mullioned windows. Across the threshold I stopped short, surveying the interior with an amazed eye. If Valcour's quarters had been luxurious, this chamber was a hundred times more so. The same fantastic murals I had seen on the Dome adorned the lofty ceiling. The rugs were thick valora weavings, the walls ornately carved fibrex.

Behind a flat-topped desk sat a huge Earthman with a round moon face and a short bristly mustache.

Valcour advanced to the front of the desk and bowed.

"I have the honor, your excellency, to present two officials from Zone three."

The Resident raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"Zone officials? Visit?" His voice was deep and booming. "Why wasn't I advised of their presence at the central gate?"

Valcour smiled blandly. "I thought to keep it a surprise."

After that the assistant Resident made introductions. Basil Sargent was a stern slow-moving man whose eyes were a mystery. But there was nothing mysterious about the welcome he heaped upon us. He questioned us briefly about conditions in the zone from which we were supposed to have come. Here I let Jamaica Lee handle the replies, and she did it in a manner that if evasive aroused no suspicion at all.

As she talked I noticed casually a small arched doorway behind Sargent's desk equipped with a lattice opening for observation. Abruptly I caught the gleam of watching eyes behind that lattice. A moment later the door opened, and a girl entered the room.

She was a creature of startling beauty. A quarter-caste Earth Mercurian girl with unmistakable traces of Venusian and Martian blood. She had the blue hair of a Venusian, but it was a softer blue, and her eyes were the black wells of the Martian crypts. She moved to the Resident's side with all the supple grace of a leopard.

"My daughter, Varessa," Sargent said. "I leave her in your hands."

V

The girl conducted us to commodious quarters on the same level. Here Varessa paused to flash a bewitching smile upon me.

"I will be back when you have rested," she said. "I will show you about the Residency and the grounds."

After she had gone I crossed to a chair and sat down slowly. My head ached from the bewildering cycle of events. I was tired unto exhaustion, and somewhere in the back of my head there brooded a cloud of uneasiness.

There was something wrong here. I could feel it with every fibre of my body. Our escape had been too easy. Warnings of our break from the monorail must have reached the Residency long before us. Yet Sargent had accepted our story practically without question. And Said Valcour whom we had left with the Resident . . . Was he to be trusted?

I tried to tie it all in with the information given us by Ephraim Floy, the monitor, and I didn't get any place. Could there be any connection between the set-up here and the Club of Revolt which had been the cause of my arrest and conviction? To these questions I could offer no answers at all, and I sat there scowling in perplexity.

There were other things: the oval containers carried by the Garaldas, the Garaldas themselves, and the attitude of Varessa which certainly went beyond the bounds of official hospitality.

The feeling of unease grew upon me and did not lessen as Jamaica Lee and I sat there waiting.

At length the door opened, and Varessa and a Mercurian guard stood before us. In her sibilant voice the quarter-caste girl said, "Lieutenant, you will go with us. Artor will conduct your companion."

If Jamaica Lee resented this attitude on the part of the Resident's daughter, she did not reveal it. We went down the corridor, descended by lift again to the main level and presently passed through an arched doorway into the grounds. Her Artor, the Mercurian and Jamaica Lee headed down a path that led toward the front of the Residency, while Varessa and I moved toward the rear of the vast structure.

The quarter-caste girl spoke quietly, describing the various transplanted growths of the gardens. But as we went deeper into the maze of terraces her air of reserve was supplanted by one of frank familiarity.

We sat down on a stone bench. She moved closer to me, and her heady perfume stole into my nostrils like an opiate.

"I'm glad you've come," she said. "It's been lonely here in The Core."

"Tell me," I said, "is life always placid here in this part of your Zone?"

She gave me a quick glance, then nodded slowly. "Why, yes. Why do you ask?"

"Those impenetration walls, the vibra-cannon at the gate, the Mercurian guards . . ."

"Oh, those." She broke into my words with a short laugh. "They're protection against the Gnarbies, I suppose."

I lit a cheroot. "But I thought the Gnarbies had no common means of communication. It seems to me . . ."

Varessa coyly drew closer, brought her lips temptingly close to mine.

"Let us talk of other things," she said.

Her large eyes were wide now, and as I gazed into them I felt their spell sweep over me. Yet even in that moment I did not forget myself. I kissed her, and I said softly,

"You love Said Valcour, don't you?"

It was a wild shot, but it hit its mark. Varessa drew back on the instant, eyes blazing.

"He told you that," she snapped. "He told you my father, the Resident, had promised me to him in marriage. Oh, the fool!" Her lips tightened spasmodically. "I wouldn't marry him for all the wealth of the outer crust."

Again I drew her to me, and again I kissed her. "He is very handsome," I said. "I wonder you should dislike him."

"He frightens me," she answered. "Only today he . . ."

A loud whirring drone interrupted her. High up over the Telutia trees a squadron of those strange bird-like creatures, the Garaldas, swept over the garden. As a unit they volplaned

to the ground and disappeared into a small wing of the Residency. That wing, I noted, was equipped with more than the usual number of windows.

"What's in there?" I said.

She was on her feet now, rearranging her dress. "Valcour's laboratory. Would you care to see it?"

Arm in arm we strode down the path to that many-windowed wing. Before the door the girl paused to dart a cautious glance over her shoulder.

"Said would be furious if he knew we entered here without his permission," she said. She turned the latch and entered, motioning me to follow.

My first glance at that room was disappointing. It was a laboratory, but a rather poorly equipped one. Racks of vials filled with colored liquids stood on three sides. In the center was a large sunken vat, the walls of which were interlaced with a network of tenorium pipes. Above the vat was a large panel with a series of dials and switches staggered across its surface.

The flying Garaldas stood in a close group at one side of the room. Their wings were folded back now, and they were carefully emptying the liquid contents of the oval containers they carried into a large floor vent. Two Mercurians stood by, overseeing the procedure.

I noted the features of those creatures at close range. They were undoubtedly avian, and with their long blonde hair and beady eyes they presented an appearance that was utterly malignant. The two Mercurians looked at us sharply at first, then paid no further attention. Varessa pointed to the vat.

"Valcour spends most of his time in this laboratory. That liquid which the Garaldas are emptying into the floor vent is a portion of the residue from the washing process that is done to the monorail at the power stations. Valcour arranged for that sluicing operation, and he pestered my father, the Resident, until he agreed to let the Garaldas carry those containers here."

"But why?" I demanded.

The quarter-caste girl smiled. "Valcour is clever. Before he instituted the washing process, the monorail required a tremendous amount of power to drive it. Much more power than the laws of gravitation and friction would lead one to believe. Valcour discovered that in its passage through the various Zones of The Core the monorail gathered an organic matter which he called Eromklat. Eromklat acted like iron filings to a magnetic field of peculiar properties in The Core. Removing it increased the speed and lessened the power necessary to the monorail by more than forty percent."

I strode forward to the vat and peered into it. Colorless liquid was pouring through feed pipes from the floor vent. I said,

"What's Valcour's idea in bringing the stuff here?"

"Experiments," she replied. "He . . ."

The girl's voice broke off as steps sounded in the doorway. Said Valcour stood there, looking at us. He smiled amiably.

"You have discovered my little hobby, I see," he said. "But we had best not linger here. An acid will be added to that solution in the vat, and the fumes may be toxic."

VI

Back in our quarters in the Residency I found Jamaica Lee waiting for me with mild hostility in her eyes. She said nothing, however, about my walk with Varessa, and I moved across to the desk, took a sheet of dal-paper and a stylus. In chronological order I set down each of the events that had occurred since my arrest on the outer crust. Then I sat back and studied them carefully.

That I was skirting the crux of

some mystery I was positive. Yet at the end of five minutes I was as much in the dark as before.

Meanwhile Jamaica Lee had been examining with an appreciative eye the intricate panelling of the walls. Adorned with bas-reliefs based on the early mythology of Mercury, they were things of beauty to behold. On one of them the eyes of a bird were inset with bits of metal, and idly she touched it with her fingers.

A whirring noise sounded, the panel slid back to reveal a spanner screen, complete with control dials and verniers.

"That's odd," Jamaica Lee said. "Why do you suppose they hid the screen this way?"

I crossed to the instrument, touched the control switch. The screen glowed, and I saw that I was viewing the Resident's main reception room. There sat Basil Sargent busily writing at his desk. I turned the dials. The central corridor of the building came into view on the screen.

"It's a spanner of the entire Residency," I said.

A moment later I found myself looking once again at the interior of Said Valcour's laboratory. Valcour was there, bending over the large vat in the center of the room. He was testing the liquid with some kind of a glass meter. But presently a light high up on the wall flashed on and off several times. Valcour straightened, put aside his instrument and went out the door.

Quickly I adjusted the spanner dial. By adjusting it I found I could follow the assistant Resident as he strode through the grounds. When he was deep in the garden, a tall Mercurian suddenly emerged from a clump of Telutia trees and greeted him shortly.

"What luck?" Valcour asked. His voice reached my ears clearly.

The Mercurian smiled. "I can report success," he replied. "All is in readiness. Even now events have developed to a point where they cannot be stopped. The big push will begin tonight."

Valcour nodded. "They are ready to accept my orders?"

"Quite ready. Your command is unquestioned. There is only one thing . . ."

"Yes?"

"The Eromklat. Sufficient reserve quantities must be sent at once."

Valcour nodded again. "I have taken care of that. Go now and see that you are not observed leaving the garden."

The assistant Resident returned to his laboratory then. I continued to watch him for several minutes, but his actions after that were all routine.

I looked at Jamaica Lee. Her face was set in a troubled frown.

"What do you make of it?" I said.

"I don't know. There's something about this Said Valcour. . . . What's Eromklat?"

"The residue left from sluicing down the monorail. It . . ."

I stopped as a sudden wild thought struck me. I swung and feverishly began to turn the spanner dial again. Through a succession of fast-fading blurs--the Residency rooms--I tuned until a scene on the screen arrested my attention.

It was a scene at the outer edge of the great underground swamp. A score of Gnarbie workmen stood in a group before the large white tent that seemed to be some kind of a headquarters. As I looked one by one a Gnarbie left his fellows to enter this tent, within which stood a Mercurian. As each native approached, the Mercurian swabbed a place low on his throat, then inserted a long needle and forced a quantity of colorless liquid into his veins.

No apparent effect was visible on the Gnarbie. He left the tent and joined another group of natives on the far side of the clearing.

But there his attitude suddenly

changed. No longer was he a solitary individualist. The entire group was talking fast and excitedly among themselves. They had a common means of communication.

I had it then, and I sat back piecing the details together while a bead of sweat broke out on my forehead. Spinning the dial again, I saw group after group of Gnarbies gathered before white tents. A hundred times I saw those needles make their injections.

In other scenes columns of Gnarbies were marching, trundling curious elongated parabolic horns mounted on wheels. In a deep recess in the swamp where light was given by hundreds of torches was a great encampment of Gnarbies. A Mercurian stood in their midst, speaking in a loud voice, but his words were unintelligible to me.

"Jamaica," I said quietly, "we're up against something big. The Gnarbies are uniting."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Eromklat in some way enables the Gnarbies to have a common means of communication. How, I don't know, but it apparently serves as the one necessary stimulus their brains needed. I mean that Valcour has enlisted the Mercurians here in The Core to aid him in marshalling the entire Gnarbie native front."

"With what purpose?"

"War against the outer crust! It's their only logical move!"

She stared at me in silence. She crossed to a chair and sat down weakly.

"If what you say is true," she said, "we've got to do something." Abruptly her eyes lighted. "The Resident?"

I shook my head. "You forget that Valcour holds the whip-hand over us. If we talk, he talks. As fugitives I'm afraid our words would carry little weight."

Even as I spoke I mentally filled in the missing details. The Club of Revolt whose web had reached out and caught me up in this bewildering cycle of events . . . that same Club of Revolt must have its source here. And civilization on the outer crust . . . I thought of the lives, the untold millions, the energy that had been spent by both the Mercurians and the Earth colonists in making this world a better place to live. True, the Oligarchy ruled with an iron hand. And it was also true that liberty and freedom had been stolen away from the masses. Yet I knew that this was but an immediate state of affairs. Already growing restrictions had been placed on the power of the Oligarchy. Already the influence of Mars and Venus was making itself felt. Was everything to be ruined now by one fanatic renegade?

Mechanically I twisted the spanner dial again. The scene had returned to Valcour's laboratory. A door on the side wall was open there. Mercurians were packing small vials into cartons and sliding those cartons down a chute through a doorway where other Mercurians were stacking them on shelves.

I clicked off the switch and turned. "Stay here," I said to Jamaica Lee. "See if you can figure a way out of this place."

Before she could reply I went out the door and made my way down the lift and down the corridors to the grounds. Keeping well in the shadow of the Telutia trees I began to approach Valcour's laboratory.

Abreast of it I stopped and made a careful survey. The Dome here was high up, the fantastic murals vague and indistinct. At a point directly above the laboratory I could discern a deeper concave depression in the ceiling out of which projected a huge conical tube ringed by a strange-looking helix of glinting metal. On the roof of the laboratory was a similar tube, much smaller in size, but with insulated conduits running down the outer walls and

ending at a rectangular cabinet mounted near the door.

For a long moment I stood there in deep thought. A vent through the Dome of The Core into the outer crust could only mean one thing. We were directly under the sunward side of Mercury. Radiating solar power was transmitted from that tube to the receiving tube on the laboratory roof.

I listened a moment, then ran lightly across the intervening space to the cabinet on the wall. I yanked it open and saw an inner panel covered with rheostats and an array of switches. The main switch operated a cut-out condenser. I pulled this blindly, shoved a rheostat marked in red over to its farthest contact. Then, very quietly, I shut the cabinet and made my way back to the Residency entrance.

Without interruption I reached the door of our quarters. But when I opened it, a voice said,

"Cheerio."

Said Valcour sat in a chair in the center of the room, smoking his Martian pipe. Opposite him was Jamaica Lee, face drawn, eyes blazing.

"Cheerio," Valcour said again. "I'm glad you've come. I was just about to start looking for you."

I shut the door and entered the room. "What the hell do you want?" I said.

The assistant Resident chuckled. "Perhaps you'd better sit down, Dainley, while we have a little talk." He opened his tweed coat, drew forth a heat pistol and leveled it at me.

"First of all," he went on, "it was quite foolish of me to overlook that spanner glass. All similar instruments in the Residency are under my control, but this one apparently was installed here by one of the early Residents, and until a few moments ago I didn't know of its existence. Fortunately the instrument in my own quarters detected it."

His smile vanished, and he leaned forward. "Dainley, you haven't the slightest idea of why you're here, have you?"

I studied him. There was a glitter in his eyes, and there was a tenseness of repressed emotions on his face.

"Your father was a Salvage Ratio clerk before you in the Bureau of Standards," the man continued. "Possibly you may recall that about twenty-two years ago your father turned over to the police a fellow employee who was later convicted of plotting against the Oligarchy. Perhaps if I mention the name, Jan Arnoldy, you will remember."

A light broke upon me. "You're Arnoldy?"

Valcour nodded. "I served ten years on that damned monorail, Dainley, and I swore that someone would pay for those lost years. When my term was up, your father was dead. There still remained, however, his son.

"His son," Valcour repeated. "I made plans for that son, and I used them. I framed a duplicate cause for his arrest in every detail the same as my own. I saw him sentenced to the monorail just as I had been. And"--he tapped the bowl of his pipe significantly--"Fate went quite a bit out of her way to aid me. For even though you managed to escape the prison train, you stumbled right into my hands a second time."

I got out a cheroot and lit it with steady hands. "Is that all?"

"No, not all." Valcour leaped to his feet. "You represent one of the classes of the outer crust I have learned to hate, Dainley. Stolid, supercilious, correct. Your class is just as bad as the ruling Oligarchy. But your time is short. I have planned great changes for this planet. No, do not misunderstand me. I want no power. I want no governing office save that which rightfully belongs to me. For years now I have been trampled on, persecuted, and this ends it.

"Even now my army of Gnarbies is forming to invade the outer crust. Even now couriers are carrying vials of Eromklat to every outpost and Zone of The Core. And Eromklat will . . ."

"I know all about Eromklat."

He looked at me. "I see," he said quietly. "Very well, let me show you that I am not exaggerating."

He crossed to the spanner, switched it on, and then made an adjustment of a small almost invisible control I had not noticed before. The screen remained dark, but a voice, heavy with Mercurian accent, began to speak:

"Zone 2, Operator 6 reporting. All Gnarbie troops in this area completely mobilized. Shastur's brigade racing through lower swamps to meet Henlow's regiment at Lookout Ridge. Corpan with two divisions will meet there in one hour. Urgent: This zone must have two thousand erlotos of Eromklat immediately."

Valcour turned the control another notch. A new voice filled the room:

"Zone 3, Operator 5 reporting. Two divisions ready to march at Baxter's Hollow. Fonlan's brigade delayed but will arrive shortly. Awaiting arrival of more Eromklat. Please rush."

Valcour switched off the spanner and smiled. "You're wondering about the Garaldas, the flying patrol force of the Oligarchy. They have been taken care of, I assure you. As for Basil Sargent, the Resident, he doesn't have the slightest knowledge of what is going on. This is the Club of Revolt, Dainley, and it's now under full swing."

I watched his gun hand as he talked, and I measured the distance to the door. But there was no chance for escape. Valcour's eyes never left us. Abruptly he moved to the wall and pulled down a curious object mounted there. An EM sword. He motioned to a similar weapon hanging near it.

"I have a flair for dramatics," he said. "I could kill you with this heat pistol, of course, but I prefer a more gentlemanly action." He took the sword in his right hand, tossed the pistol to the floor. Reaching to the wall again, he drew from its hangings two metal-studded baldrics, one of which he tossed to me.

"Put it on, Dainley. I'm sure you know the procedure."

Like all Earth colonists on Mercury I had in the past taken a few fencing instructions with the EM sword. Now as I draped the tight-fitting belt about my shoulders and waist, I realized only too well what I was up against. Your EM--electromagnetic--sword is a strange weapon whose early history is lost in antiquity. It consists of a rapier with a forked prong, the ends of which are not only sharpened to a needle point but which also carry a powerful electric charge. In fencing, the duelist wears a baldric equipped with copper buttons, each of which covers a vital or semi-vital spot of the body. As the electric current passes through the sword points, it sets up a magnetic field which all but guides the rapier to the vulnerable points covered by the copper buttons.

I took down the second EM sword and switched on its current. Across the room Jamaica Lee gazed at us in silence.

"Don't do it, Mark," she said suddenly. "He'll kill you."

Valcour lifted his sword in salute. "Are you ready, sir? On guard."

There was no doubt of it, the man was a paranoiac, but he was also an athlete in spite of his years. He fought with skill and cunning, and he moved his rapier in and out with amazing confidence. We crossed the room twice, blades crashing. Beside the center table Valcour feinted and lunged. I could hear the magnetic coils of his weapon hum, but I parried and escaped his thrust by inches.

Valcour laughed. "You fight well, sir."

Again he feinted and lunged, but this time I returned with a riposte that clicked one point of my sword against the button just below his throat and sent the other probing lightly into his flesh. He mouthed an oath, and attacked with new fury. And now I saw I could never rely on trickery to defeat him. My only hope lay in keeping a defense until he would tire himself out. This hope was dashed when a moment later by a series of cunning maneuvers he backed me into a corner and poised for the final attack.

And then behind him the door opened. Varessa, the quarter-caste girl, stole into the room. Her eyes fell upon Valcour's pistol on the floor where he had thrown it, and swift as a shadow she scooped it up. Valcour caught my look and glanced over his shoulder.

"Varessa!"

The girl said nothing. She stood there motionless, holding the heat pistol; her face was slightly drawn and white; other than that she displayed no emotion.

"Varessa, you don't understand. These people . . ."

"Get out!" She said it quietly. But Valcour caught and understood her tone. He hesitated a moment, then flung his sword to the floor, crossed the room and went out the door. When he had gone Varessa slammed the barrier shut and pressed against it.

"Quick!" she said. "You haven't a moment to lose. Even now he's on his way to the Resident."

She opened a connecting door that led into an adjoining chamber, led the way to a staircase that descended to a lower level. Down this we raced to find ourselves at length in a huge grotto. Varessa clapped her hands, and a Mercurian came running up. The girl gave a short order, and a moment later a small two-seater tracto-car came trundling down an automatic ramp.

"Drive parallel with the swamps for ten miles," she said. "Then turn east along the green road. If you're stopped anywhere simply show your visas."

I shook my head. "We can't run out now. There's more at stake than our two lives. Valcour is sending a shipment of Eromklat to . . ."

"You fool!" Her eyes blazed at me. "I know everything. The shipment will be moving east along the green road. You've got to stop it!"

She swung herself over the driver's seat and planted her carmine lips against mine. "Luck, my Lieutenant," she whispered. Then she leaped to the wall and pulled down a glass-handled switch. A section of the building wall folded back. The automatic ramp catapulted us forward. Moments later we were speeding past the Residency, winding through the grounds to the main gate. The sentry barely glanced at our papers. The gate opened, and we shot across the plain toward the distant hills. On we swept, the wind humming over the forward-screen, the powerful engines throbbing dully. Jamaica Lee sat at my side in tense silence.

When it came, the vibration was deafening. To the rear a great grinding roar sounded. Looking back I saw a sheet of yellow flame and black smoke vomit upward from the rear wing of the Residency.

"Valcour's laboratory," I said. "At least he'll manufacture no more Eromklat for a while."

VII

Though the way before us was rough and uneven I drove hard and fast for some time. There was no sign of pursuit. The low rolling landscape of The Core with its intermittent Telutia tree groves and its orderly rows of geometric bush seemed to continue on to infinity. Above us the Dome was almost lost in the heights, yet as I looked up I could see for the first time the explana-

tion of the light in this underground world. It too was man-made, achieved by a series of titanic longitudinal prisms which caught the solar light striking the sunward side of the outer crust and diffused its heat and radiance gently and evenly. And then the dark wall of the swamp came into view on our left, brooding, forbidding. I began to grow impatient. Varessa had said ten miles. We had covered more than that. Yet there was still no sign of the green road.

It rose up before us abruptly, a narrow ribbon of emerald-colored macadam that followed the curving line of the swamp in a great arc. I swung the tracto-car into it and turned on more power.

What was I seeking? A caravan? A single tracto-car? I didn't know, and I damned the contingency that had made necessary leaving the Residency before I could question Varessa. On and on we raced, ever penetrating deeper into the unknown.

Jamaica Lee found a compartment in the side of the car and drew forth a heat pistol and a three-dimensional topographic map. She focused an enlarging glass over it and studied it some moments in silence.

"Apparently this road is the connecting link between all occupied Zones of The Core," she said. "See. Here is the Residency, and here is where we are. And over here, bisecting the swamp, is the monorail. All we have to do is continue down this highway until we come up with the Eromklat shipment."

I shook my head. It was too easy. With his cunning, Said Valcour would have foreseen this possible pursuit and would have taken precautions. Sooner or later we'd run into trouble.

Trouble came before I had finished the thought. One moment the emerald road stretched before us into the measureless distance; the next it was multiplying into four, eight, sixteen roads, all identically the same, all convering from the same hub. I stopped the car.

"What's the matter?" said Jamaica Lee.

"Matter? I don't know which road to take. That's what's the matter!"

The girl stared at me. "Are you crazy? There's only one road."

I rubbed my eyes, but there was nothing wrong with my vision. Sixteen roads--I counted them--fanned out before me in every direction except toward the swamp. As I gazed at them I saw two more make their appearance.

"Slide over here in the driver's seat and tell me what you see," I said.

We exchanged places, and the girl uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"How strange. I'll have to give you directions while you drive."

But as she spoke the multiple roads came into view from the secondary position too.

"It's Valcour," I said. "He threw up this direction-maze to thwart pursuit."

"But how?"

"I don't know entirely. But I can guess. You'll note the light in this Zone issues from a comparatively centralized area. In some way Valcour has succeeded in bending the light rays or at least in refracting them at this particular spot. You might say we're looking through a prism."

"But one of them must be the real road."

I shook my head. "If you ask me, Valcour's Eromklat shipment didn't go this way at all. It headed directly into the swamp. There must be a way through."

A cleverly concealed passage into the marsh revealed itself presently, a narrow mat-thatched lane flanked on either side by black water. The roadway wavered and billowed as the tracto-car glided onto it. It was perilous driving. The slightest twist to right or left and . . .

I preferred not to think of the consequences. As we went deeper into the swamp, the light slowly faded, and despair began to mount within me. Suddenly we came out on a narrow aisle where the vegetation had been burned clear.

"Stop!" said Jamaica Lee. I threw over the control as she pointed upward. "The overhead rail."

There it was, extending in either direction as far as the uncertain light permitted us to see, a single hexagon-shaped track suspended by mighty cables from the Dome. As we sat there a low humming vibration sounded.

"The monorail's coming," she said. "It must have made a complete circumnavigation of The Core."

I moved the car forward from under the track and sat there a moment in indecision. Valcour's Eromklat shipment definitely had left the green road and come this way on the swamp trail. Why? The answer struck me hard. To be packed on the monorail. What better means of transshipping the stuff from one Zone to another? This swamp road doubtless continued on to a secondary power station or loading platform where the exchange could be made. Valcour would drive a long distance through the marsh to throw off suspicion. And the more I thought of it, the more positive I was that Valcour himself was in command of that shipment now. in some way he had bypassed us, gone ahead to take charge.

The overhead rail was singing now like a giant violin.

I climbed out of the car, motioned the girl after me. I leaned back over the dash, turned the motor rheostat to its farthest marking, then using all my strength, snapped off a piece of the steering bar. I reached under the cowl and jammed that bar across the positive and negative contacts and leaped back.

A sheet of flame spiralled upwards. In an instant the car became a raging holocaust, the glare of its fire throwing crimson tongues toward the Dome. The overhead rail was a vibrating roar, and as I pulled Jamaica Lee into the underbrush, the black bulk of the monorail thundered down upon us. Wheels ground, slowed. A siren sent its plangent stream echoing through the silence. Not five feet from where we crouched the lead motor-coach came to a standstill.

It was now or never. Gripping the heat pistol, I vaulted across the intervening space, swung up the two-rung ladder and thrust the barrel hard intot he midsection of the astonished driver.

"They tell me in ancient Earth history there was a chap by the name of Jesse James," I said quietly. "I don't know much about the gentleman, and you won't either unless you get going."

He moved quickly. An instant later the monorail was boring into the swamp.

Standing there beside the panel of those massive motors, I watched Jamaica Lee as she coolly moved across to the driver and searched him for weapons. He had none, and there was no indication of trickery about the man. A windowless connecting door led from the motor-cab to the first adjacent coach. Deliberately I pushed this door open and pressed close to the wall beside it, waiting.

A figure appeared in the doorway. I raised the head gun, then lowered it with a sigh of relief.

"Floy!"

The little mannikin of a man opened his mouth in astonishment as he saw us. Then he tugged at his clipped beard and chuckled.

"For a couple of ex-prisoners you certainly move fast," he said. "Where the devil have you been?"

In rapid sentences Jamaica Lee poured out our story. Ephraim Floy listened attentively, his button eyes slowly narrowing as the girl

explained about Eromklat and its intended use. When she had finished, his face was stern.

"So that's the meaning behind those sluicing operations at the power stations," he said. "Yes, we're due to stop at an emergency station just ahead. Official orders were visiphoned us to pick up a shipment there. The orders didn't say what the shipment contained." He peered through the stepto-glass vision screen. "We'll be there in a moment."

"Can you keep the guards away from here until we do?" I said.

"I don't know." Floy looked worried. "I'm afraid you two have bitten off more than you can chew."

I cast an eye over the interior of the motor-coach. "That shipment has got to be stopped. Is there anything here that can be used to . . ."

"Wait!" The Monitor tugged his beard fiercely. "There's a vibra-gun in the prow. It takes pretty expert shooting to hit anything when the monorail is under way, but you can try. Here." He pressed a stud, and a panel tripped open revealing a long arelium steel barrel equipped with telescopic sights. I handed the heat pistol to Jamaica who kept it trained on the driver; then I watched as Floy showed me how the weapon operated. Suddenly Jamaica Lee said, "I can see lights ahead." The driver glanced at me as if for instructions. I said,

"Slow down in the usual way. And no false moves. Understand?"

Floy touched the siren button twice in what apparently was the regular signal. He said,

"Good luck. I'll tell the dragoons something or other." He went through the door into the adjoining coach. Peering through the stepto-glass screen, I saw the lights ahead grow brighter, saw a low platform in the midst of a circular clearing swim into view. Beside it, drawn up in a row, were three large-sized tracto-cars. There were no occupants in the cars, but a number of Mercurians stood waiting on the platform.

I looked through the telescopic sights, trained the vibra-gun on the three tracto-cars. I rested my finger on the trigger. A whole civilization rested on this shot, and I meant to make it good. The monorail was slowing down.

I fired! A column of dirt and water geysered upward ten yards in front of the platform, but the three cars remained untouched. Desperately I pushed aside the telescopic sight swivel and pressed the trigger a second time.

This time luck was with me. There was no explosion, no sheet of flame, but the tracto-cars seemed to disintegrate before my eyes. Girders and body slowly dissolved into nothingness. Then I swung on the driver of the monorail. "All right, open her up."

Our speed began to increase again, but as the monorail sped past the platform a man ran frantically and hurled himself at the tracing coaches. Looking back, I saw him clutch a grab-iron, swing there like a pendulum for a moment, then slowly mount to the top of the car.

I said to Jamaica Lee, "We'll have a visitor in a moment. Said Valcour is here."

There was a short ladder and a circular hatch leading to the roof of the car. I stood below it, waiting. And that was my first and almost last mistake. A voice said, "Cheerio," and a heat gun charge slammed past my head to turn the door frame of the connecting coach into a charred mess. I wheeled, realizing that only the swaying of the motor-coach around a curve had prevented that charge from reaching its mark.

Valcour stood beside the vibra-gun. The open stepto-glass window showed his way of entrance. He leveled the heat gun again, and I could see his finger tighten on

the trigger. But even as I threw myself to the floor of the cab, two shots sounded almost simultaneously. Valcour spun around and crashed backward. Behind me in the open doorway of the connecting coach I saw Ephraim Floy holding his own smoking pistol clutch at his waist.

"Floy!" Unmindful of the driver who had turned to stare foolishly, Jamaica Lee ran to the Monitor and passed her arm under his shoulders. "Floy!"

The little man slowly slumped to his knees. He tried to speak but blood bubbled to his lips. He tugged at his beard, raised his hand in a feeble gesture of triumph and lay still.

Across the cab Said Valcour, face livid, was propped against the step-to-glass screen. There was a crimson spot on the upper part of his tweed coat, and the pistol had slipped from his useless fingers. In spite of his wound, he forced a chuckle.

"Well, Dainley, I guess this ends it. You've got the Eromklat shipment, and you've got me. I like things tidied up, Dainley. We may as well write this up and close the book. Here." He reached in his inner pocket with his good hand and threw forward a sheaf of papers. "Everything you need, Dainley, to complete your case: organization of the Club of Revolt, secret of Eromklat, even statements which will prove your own innocence in any court of law. As I said, I played my hand and lost. You've won, Dainley, and since you've won, you might as well win all." He reached down, tore a globe-shaped metallic charm from his watch chain and tossed it before him on the cab floor. "Oh . . . Cheerio."

He didn't fall. He simply stood there, propped against the glass screen, but a last shudder passed through him, and his eyes became glazed. I turned to Jamaica Lee who still knelt by the motionless Ephraim Floy. The girl was sobbing gently. I felt the Monitor's wrist. The pulse was a feeble flutter, but even as I held the hand, that pulse faded and ceased altogether.

"He's gone," I said. "He was a nice little guy."

She stood up, brushed moisture from her eyes. "What now, Mark?"

"Now," I said, "home. Which means back to the outer crust. New trials for you and myself. Even if the Gnarbie revolt continues without the Eromklat shipment, which I doubt, we'll arrive back at Umbra in time to spread a warning. As Valcour said, this ends it."

Her eyes showed satisfaction yet seemed filled with sadness. "I'm not so sure," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure what I mean. But it's too pat, too complete, too final. Don't you see, Mark, we've been living straight melodrama ever since we left the monorail. We've met obstacles and overcome them at terrific odds. Always we managed to slide through on top. Life isn't like that."

I laughed. "It is this time. Nothing this side of Pluto is going to . . ."

"Life isn't like that," she said again. "An even amount of failure is always mixed with success. That may be a fatalistic outlook, but it's been my philosophy for years, and somehow it always seems to have held true. Look, Mark, for a time we held the whole future of Mercury in the palm of our hands. It's inconceivable that we should peg everything in its correct position without stumbling against destiny ourselves."

"You're done up," I said. "Sit down and you'll feel better in a moment. I . . ."

And then it happened. Five feet away the globe-shaped good-luck charm which Valcour had torn from his watch chain suddenly began to rotate on its peg-bottom with a loud hiss.

Continued on p. 42

PLANET IN PERIL

by Lin Carter

Star Pirate battles the murder monsters of Mercury!

I. Flaming Doom!

The richest and most powerful Earth colony on Mercury is called Belt City. Once a lawless, rip-roaring frontier town, filled with saloons and bawdy houses and dope-dens, where a man's life wasn't worth a plugged credit unless he was handy with his power guns, Belt City is now staid, quiet and respectable, and the center of the Colonial Government, with jurisdiction over all citizens, colonists and the queer, gold-eyed, mahogany-skinned natives themselves.

Tiny, heat-baked Mercury, smallest of the Nine Worlds, circles perilously close to the mighty sun itself, and so slowly that it always presents the same side to that cosmic furnace of intolerable blazing heat. The Sunside, as it is called, is of course uninhabitable, hotter than the interior of a blast furnace... a strange and awesome desert of parched and crumbling rocks, savage gorges and rivers of lava, where lakes of liquid silver and pools of molten copper make inhospitable this region, where men can venture but briefly, and then only under heavy heatproof energy shields, to mine and prospect the pure metals needed to feed the insatiable maw of Earth's industries.

A weird contrast is the second

hemisphere of this diminutive world--the Darkside, whose face is ever turned to the cold, uncaring stars . . . a frozen tundra region of crawling glaciers, whose soil is eternally locked under a thick sheath of mile-deep ice. The only hospitable region on Mercury is that thin zone of temperate climate which exists between the two extremes: the Twilight Belt, it is called, and it is there in the Belt that the first explorers and colonists and prospectors from Earth reared Belt City.

While, as already stated, most of Belt City has long outlived its scarlet past and its reputation for murder, iniquity and greed, the last lingering remnants of the old days cluster in the rotting slums down near the spaceport, where decaying sheds and hovels of sheet-plastic and corrugated tin slump into ruin from decades of neglect. There, narrow, garbage-choked alleys of raw muddy dirt meander between rows of gambling dens, flophouses, wineshops, cheat hotels, and even less reputable establishments.

It was from one of these, the Golden Horseshoe, that the first recorded victim of the Fire Troll emerged into the fresh evening breeze. His name was Wild Bill Borden, and he was pure Texan American, all six feet and five inches of him--beefy, crafty, strong as a bull, and dangerous as a rattler who has just been stepped on.

Wild Bill was never more dangerous than when he had taken aboard a bellyful of his favorite beverage, a potent brew of what purported to be genuine Kentucky sourmash bourbon, and went under the label of "Ol' Space Ranger" . . . although it was greatly to be doubted if the powerful liquor had ever seen Kentucky, or, for that matter, Earth itself.

he was a rare metals prospector, was Wild Bill, and one of the best. With his iron strength and granite endurance, he could toil under the blistering blaze of the gigantic Sun--which filled nearly the entire sky of the Sunside, from horizon to horizon--longer than most Earthling miners could manage, even with triple-strength heat-shields.

Slipping a little in a puddle of rancid mud as he came off the porch of the saloon and stepped down to the crooked alley of beaten earth that served as a "street," Wild Bill cursed and regained his balance with some little difficulty. He leaned against the porch rail for a few moments, until the scenery stopped revolving around and around him like a merry-go-round run out of control, then went lurching up the street towards The Nine Worlds, where he had booked a room for the night.

Along the way he paused to aim a kick and a cringing cur gnawing some semi-edible snack from amidst a heap of rotting garbage. The creature hissed and snapped at him, but scuttled aside and darted into an inky-black walk-through between the buildings on its six scaly legs. What he had mistaken for an Earthly mutt thus proved to be one of the large lizard-things which the native Mercurians tamed as house-pets.

Wild Bill cursed again, damning all the slinking, crafty, vindictive natives, with their teakwood hides, eyes like gold coins, and dour, humorless ways. The Earthlings and the native Mercurians lived together under an uneasy, ramshackle truce, and old suspicions and distrusts--deep-rooted and of long standing--still caused a lot of tension between the races. However, the Earthside colonists needed servants to tidy their bungalows over in the more fashionable quarter of Belt City, the cafes and hotel kitchens needed busboys, dish-washers, and cheap help to carry out the garbage, scrub the floors, and perform such menial tasks as most Earthlings would not care to soil their hands with... so the Mercurians swallowed their ancient pride, concealed their cold

contempt for these outworlders, and accepted their money.

These thoughts were perhaps drifting hazily through Wild Bill's whiskey-soaked brain as he turned around a corner into the black mouth of a side-alley which led to the sleazy little hotel which he had honored that night with his patronage, when he stepped out of the waking world and directly into nightmare--

Something taller than a man, with a huge, bulging bald pate crowned with lyre-covered horns, its snarling face all blazing red eyes and curved beak like a parrot's, stepped into his path and lifted hideous, smoking, white-hot four-clawed paws to clutch him by neck and shoulder. As the awful heat of those burning paws seared Bill's dingy, faded coveralls black and smouldering, the hapless Earthling screamed like a stallion under the gelding wire.

But such was his superhuman strength and endurance, that Wild Bill clung to consciousness just long enough to whisper an enigmatic phrase to the ear of the first medic to reach his side . . . a weird, uncanny phrase which soon adorned the headlines of the front page of every newsfax in the Nine Worlds:

". . . A Fire Troll got me!... Gawd in heaven, it was a Fire Troll . . ."

II. Calling Star Pirate

On Haven, that tiny worldlet lost among a whirling meteor-swarm in the uncharted regions of the Asteroid Zone, rugged cliffs and scarps of naked stone lifted to the distant stars. Their slopes and the vales that stretched between them were thickly grown with an odd forest of queer-looking trees which closely resembled titanic ferns.

Few of the asteroids retain enough super-heavy metals at their core to sustain sufficient gravity to hold moisture and any kind of an atmosphere to their breast, but Haven was one of these, and that was the reason why Star Pirate had chosen Haven, back in the wild, lawless days when he was a buccaneer of the spaceways, for his secret hideout. Even today, a free man, his past record wiped clean with a blanket pardon from a grateful System government, now when he devoted his keen wits and space-honed skills to fighting crimes, not committing them, Star still dwelt on Haven.

It was a late afternoon. In one part of the huge dome-room, Star sat at a desk of polished mineral, poring over sheafs of computer printouts and depth-photos of the puzzling petroglyphs left behind ages ago by the mysterious inhabitants of the lost planet, Aster, whose breakup in the gravitic tug-of-war between Jupiter and Saturn on the one hand and the mighty sun on the other had created the zone of huge rock-fragments which circle ever between the orbits of Mars and the giant, Jupiter. The attempt to decipher the enigmatic records the lost race had left, here and there, carven on the stony surface of a handful of asteroids, was Star's consuming hobby--no: his passion.

At the opposite side of the shallow curved dome, through whose lucent plasteel surface the stars blazed and flashed and sparkled like diamonds strewn on black velvet, Star's sidekick and buddy, Phath, reclined on a rattan lounger, plucking moodily on an eleven-stringed pittipak from his native Venus. The plaintive, moaning tune he played was one of the poignant, atonal love-songs from the Low Swamp country, his homeland. From time to time, when no adventure beckoned, no tantalizing mystery taunted with its allure of the Unknown, the slim, albino-pale Venusian lapsed into a melancholy of homesickness.

And this was just such a time. It had been weeks since last they had been summoned to the aid of be-

leaguered justice, to do battle against a mystery-mastermind of supercrime, and the languid, moody Venusian was suffering from acute boredom.

Then the flashing of a sharp green light over the ground-glass screen of the huge televisor roused him from his lethargy. Phath tossed the musical instrument on the couch and bounded lithely to his feet, excitement sparkling in his strange pink eyes. Star Pirate looked up from his work, frowning.

"That will be Carew," he guessed. "And about this nasty 'Fire Troll' business out on Mercury, I'll bet," said the Ace of Space distractedly. Phath looked exultant, because he knew his chief had to be right: only Commander Jason Carew, senior Space Patrol officer on Pallas, was entrusted with a few trusted others with the secret combination of wavelengths used to contact Star Pirate's hideout on his special multiwave televisor.

Light and color swirled in the ground-glass screen, and tightened into focus. Now a lean, hawk-faced man with a space-tan of deep bronze and keen, steady gray eyes under a trim head of hair the same precise shade peered out at them. He wore the high-necked tunic and slacks, space-black, of the Patrol.

"Glad you were in, Star," said the officer in clipped tones. Despite his calm, his self-control, he looked worried and tense.

"What's up, Commander? This Mercury business?" inquired the younger man. Jason Carew relaxed his stiff features, permitting himself a reluctant half-smile.

"Can't catch you napping, lad! Never could when you were on the wrong side of the law, and still can't, even now that you're fighting the good fight on our side. Yes . . . seven murders, each in the same manner, the most recent at nine o'clock this morning, Solar Standard time. All the victims men of no particular consequence--"

"And all killed the same way, burnt to death, apparently by the searing heat of white-hot paws," rapped Star harshly.

Carew nodded slowly. "Yes, the throat or torso of each victim bore the same horrible burn-marks left by four-clawed paws. I understand Fire Trolls are supposed, in Mercurian myths, to have four-clawed hands and feet."

"What's the story on these Fire Trolls, anyway, Commander?" burst in Phath the Venusian. "Anything to the notion, or is it just pure legend . . .?"

"Insofar as we know, they fall into the same class with vampires, werewolves and goblins," said Carew, with the ghost of a smile. "However, the System's a big place, and lots of strange mysteries and curious creatures may lurk just beyond the edges of discovery . . . will you see to it for us, Star? The colonists on Mercury are panicky, on the verge of open revolt and wholesale flight, unless something is done soon--"

"On our way, Carew," said Star, rising to his feet and buckling on his gunbelt. The screen went dark.

"Ready the Jolly Roger for flight within the hour, Phath; I want to be on our way to Mercury before the Universe is an hour older!"

"By Yakdar's iridium intestines--some action at last!" grinned Phath. And whether his ejaculation was in the nature of a curse or a prayer, none could say. Perhaps it was both.

Only thirty minutes later Star's trim little speedster lifted from the rocky, fern-clad surface of the jungle moonlet, raising to the stars on a plume of rocket-fire. The deadly "moat" of whirling meteors which surrounded Haven would be sudden death to any craft ignorant of the secret freeway through the maze of hurtling rock, ice and iron . . . but Star had long ago planted radio-beacons on key meteors, and by their

coded signals the Jolly Roger's "brain" (a compact, but superbly capable computer) guided them unerringly through the moat of whirling death. They emerged into clear ether without so much as a scratch to mar the black enamel which made the little speedster all but invisible in the dark night of space.

Falling well below the plane of the ecliptic, so as to be safely beyond most of the asteroids in the Zone, Star switched on the robot autopilot and turned in his huge swivel-chair to the televisor. He began fiddling with the vernier dials while his Venusian sidekick watched curiously.

"Who you callin', chief? Pallas Base?"

"No; I need to consult briefly with Zoar."

The pallid-skinned Venusian screwed up his face, with the expression of one experiencing a very bad smell. The bald and wrinkled green dwarf, Dr. Zoar, one of the wisest and most learned of the philosophic savants of Mars, was Star Pirate's old mentor and ally. Little love was lost between Phath and Zoar, however, and whenever they got together the bickering and name-calling between them was vituperative and seemed childish to Star.

"Calling Dr. Zoar . . . this is Star Pirate, calling Dr. Zoar," the redheaded adventurer spoke into the microphone. But the ground-glass screen whirled with a vortex of meaningless colors and did not resolve into the wrinkled, scowling features of the little Martian scientist.

III. Fire Trolls

Riding its arch of atom-fire, the Jolly Roger hurtled through the void, passing "beneath" the asteroids and approaching the orbit of Mars. Ere long the Red Planet could be seen dead ahead, and in his mind's eye Star Pirate could see the vast plains of ochre dust, the half-ruined cities of ancient amber marble, the broad belts of rubbery blue vegetation which were the famous "canals" . . .

"Phath, keep trying to get Zoar on the 'visor," he directed. "I'm going back to consult the library computer. We need all the dope we can get on these Fire Trolls, legendary or not!"

"Right, chief," nodded the Venusian.

A little while later, finding nothing of use in the computer memory, Star returned to the control cabin and discovered that Phath had just managed to get through to Dr. Zoar. Indeed, the dwarfish Martian was glaring out of the screen at the grinning Venusian. "What is it now, you moss-eared swamp-lizard?" snapped the savant impatiently, bending a malignant scowl on the albino. "Don't you realize that I am on the verge of a momentous discovery--?"

Phath flushed a little and his pink eyes went hard and venomous. "Izzat so, you knee-high green toad? Why, you wouldn't know a momentous discovery if you fell over one--which, considering your height, so called, wouldn't be hard to do!" he returned with vigor in his hissing tones.

Zoar's scowl, if possible, grew even more malignant than before. "Now listen, you web-footed, mud-wallowing, fungus-eating--!"

"Why, you dust-swallowing midget! I'd step on you, if I didn't know that with your bloated ego, you'd explode like a pricked balloon, you --!"

"Children--children!" sighed Star Pirate in long-suffering tones, stepping between the Venusian and the Martian mirrored in the 'visor screen. Grumbling a curse to his low swamp devil-god, the lithe Venusian relinquished the chair and Star took a seat before the machine. At the sight of him, Zoar relaxed his ferocious scowl and his

age-seamed and time-wrinkled features assumed an expression almost mild.

"Oh, it's you, lad! You'll be interested to hear the results of my latest observations--I have detected the most interesting slight perturbations in the orbit of Pluto! If they recur on a periodic basis, I may have found proof of the existence of a trans-Plutonian planet--the one astronomers have inferred and alleged may well exist on the uttermost verge of the Solar System--the long-rumored 'Persephone,' Pluto's ancient companion on the long voyage through the blackness of space . . ."

"Interesting, Doc, but some other time," rapped Star. "I'm on a case that seems to have the Patrol baffled, and I need some information on the Mercurian legends of so-called Fire Trolls. Can you give me a hand?"

Zoar's froglike face became thoughtful. "Extra-planetary anthropology and folklore is a little out of my range, lad," he admitted slowly, "but, of course, I have glanced at the material a time or two, over the decades. Precisely what do you need to know?"

"That's the trouble," Star said ruefully. "At this stage in the game, I haven't a wisp of an idea what might or might not be of help to me, in the way of data. First, what are they supposed to look like?"

"Crudely humanoid; broad-shouldered, deep-chested, hump-backed; flat, hairless heads crowned with immense cow-horns; glaring red eyes; parrot-like beak; yellow, rugose hide--"

Phath, at Star's shoulder, wrinkled up his slim nose. "'Rugose'?" he murmured. "What's 'rugose'--?"

"Scaly," Star snapped, with an impatient shrug of burly well-muscled shoulders. "Don't interrupt! Go on, Doc, anything else?"

"They supposedly dwell on the Sunside, since their own bodies are as hot as molten lead," said the scientist. "When strangers from the Twilight Belt invade their parched and burning wastes, they kill ruthlessly and without compassion . . . searing the flesh of ordinary mortals to the bone with a touch of their super-heated four-clawed paws. And that's about all I can tell you, lad: just dusty old Mercurian legends, dating from the old days long before the arrival of the first Earthling explorers."

Star asked: "Any possibility such creatures might actually exist?"

Dr. Zoar puffed out his sunken cheeks. "Absolutely not, boy! Nothing that lives, not even the hardiest bacteria, could survive for an instant in temperatures that turn solid iridium, cadmium, silver and lead to pure liquids."

After a few more words, Star signed off and the televisor screen went blank and lifeless. He turned away from the machine, a slight frown on his space-tanned features.

"Find out what you were lookin' for, chief?" inquired Phath hopefully.

Slowly, reluctantly, Star shook his red head.

"The only thing I found out I already had a hunch I knew," he muttered. "That the monsters we're looking for don't even exist--and can't!"

IV. City of Fear

It was obvious that Belt City was haunted by a nameless fear. You could read it in the drawn and haggard features of the folk who hurried down the narrow streets, searching the shadows and probing the dark leering mouths of gloom-drenched alleys with wary, suspicious, fearful eyes. Star and Phath had hardly left the spaceport before they noticed the difference between the Mercurian capital and other towns.

"Yakdar!" swore the slender Venusian. "Chief, you notice how the people scurry from shop to shop... like something, some unseen horror,

was snappin' at their heels?"

Star's handsome, bronzed face was grim, his green eyes--usually sparkling with deviltry and mischief--were brooding and somber. He nodded curtly.

"I also notice they do their shopping in little groups--twos and threes--I don't see anyone who's walking all alone," he retorted in a low voice to his partner.

Many of the shops and stores they passed were closed, boarded up, darkened and empty. More than a few sported hastily painted "For Sale" signs. For a thriving young metropolis, the rich capital of a metals-wealthy world, this seemed more than odd . . .

It seemed . . . sinister!

When they reached System House near the square where stood the traditional First Landing monument, so similar to those on many other worlds, they were hustled into the Governor's study. He was a lean, harried-looking man, with fine aristocratic features in a worn, tired face, under a trim head of silver hair. He greeted the two adventurers with relief and optimism almost visible in his manner.

"Welcome to Mercury, sir! Thank heaven you've come," he said in tones that shook, just a little, with tension. "The Patrol seems helpless to do combat with this mystery-menace --this shadowy terror that stalks our streets, and is driving our citizens away from Belt City in droves--!"

"Which explains the abnormal number of closed and shuttered shops we noticed on the way here," commented Star. The Governor nodded sadly.

"I've tried to put heart into my people, to remind them of their hardy forebears, those staunch and fearless men and women who pioneered a rugged, lawless, unexplored frontier world teeming with unknown perils . . . but civilization has softened their fibre, I'm afraid. Not a ship leaves for Earth, or Luna, or Venus, but dozens and dozens of our citizens are on it, fleeing from the horror that hovers over our heads and strikes seemingly where and when it will . . ."

"Your law-enforcement agencies are certainly policing the streets--?"

The Governor nodded, silvery hair glistening in the muted light of tooled lamps of native Mercurian craftsmanship. "Of course! I've recalled every member of the Civic Guard from vacation or sick leave, drafted government clerks to free other officers from desk jobs, so they can patrol the streets. But nothing serves to halt the spread of these horrible crimes . . ."

"The Fire Troll," murmured Star Pirate thoughtfully, and was startled to see the effect his unthinking words had on the older man, who paled to the lips, and swayed as if about to collapse.

"Steady there, sir!" snapped Star, bracing the Governor with a strong arm about his shoulders. He eased the other into a nearby chair and pressed a hip-flask of potent Jovian brandy to the older man's lips. After a grateful sip or two, the Governor was breathing more easily, the color returning to his worn and weary face. He drew a deep breath and attempted a rather shaky smile.

"You must forgive me, sir; I'll admit I have been under considerable strain these last two weeks . . . these ghastly murders, the inability of the police to capture this fiend--"

As if on cue, a burly, heavy-set man in a dark uniform came brusquely into the room, stopping short when he saw the visitors. He had a square, red face and eyes as cold and hard and gray as fractured steel.

"Sorry, Grayson! Didn't know you were in conference," he said shortly. The Governor beckoned him near and made the introductions. The newcomer was Commissioner Hardrock, commander of the local law-enforcement agencies. He eyed Star and the slim Venusian distrustfully--

even truculently. But at the same time something very much like relief glimmered in his cold gray eyes.

"Star Pirate, eh?" he barked. "Heard of you, of course. Patrol says you've reformed; work for the law these days, not against it. Hope so!" Then, abruptly, Hardrock turned to the Governor and crisply reported that there had been another murder.

Governor Kirkland blanched, his fine, aristocratic features wincing with pain. "A-another, you say? Where, man?"

"Alley behind the Golden Horseshoe," rapped the Commissioner. "Miner called Sam McCallister . . . been with Mercury Metals & Minerals for eighteen years. Lean and leathery little fellow, all steel wire and whipcord. Didn't die until after the medics got to him. Dragged himself a block or so, following the Troll--"

"Great heavens! . . . Even with the kind of burns he must have had?" cried Grayson Kirkland in amazement.

Reluctant admiration showed in Hardrock's blunt features. "Cursed tough and gutsy little fellow," he nodded. "Don't think I could have done it myself, and I'm no weakling!"

"Did McCallister say in which direction the Fire Troll went?" inquired Star Pirate, keen interest lighting his green eyes. Hardrock nodded.

"Eastaway, down Settlers' Street," he said. But he said the words to Star Pirate's back, for already the tall space-adventurer was halfway out of the door.

V. The Golden Horseshoe

"Where we goin', chief?" demanded Phath, panting as he struggled to keep up with his partner's long, rangy stride. "Settlers' Street, I'll bet!"

"Later," said Star Pirate briefly. "First I want to check out this Golden Horseshoe saloon . . . did you notice that this was the second time the near vicinity of this establishment has been the scene of one of the Fire Troll's murders?"

Phath blinked in thought. "The first was that big miner, Bill Borden, right? Wild Bill, they used to call him . . ."

Star nodded curtly. "Right. Borden had just left the saloon. He hadn't gone more than a block before the Troll stepped out of the shadows to slay him with his burning touch . . . and now another is killed in the same way, and within a stone's throw of the first."

"Think it means something, chief?"

Star shrugged. "We'll see."

The manager of The Golden Horseshoe was a fat, good-humored, moon-faced Uranian, with the butter-yellow skin and liquid black eyes of his kind. His name was Aardh. He was totaling up the receipts of the previous night when they entered the saloon, which was a huge, cavernous structure of prefabricated plastex panelling braced with struts of synthe-steel. The central feature of the big room was a deeply curved stage which thrust out from the wings and glowed with rich carvings of the rare Mercurian marble called goldstone. The horseshoe-shaped stage and its hue explained the establishment's name.

The fat Uranian gave them a jolly glance as they approached. He saw two ordinary-looking spacemen in drab gray zipper-suits, the kind of one-piece coveralls spacemen usually wore under their space gear.

"Ain't open yet, gents," he boomed in hearty tones. "Place don't open for business till noon, y'know--local ordinance. Come back then, boys, and it'll be my pleasure to stand the two of you to a mug of your favorite tipple--"

He broke off, words trailing away, eyes bulging with disbelief, when the tall, bronzed Earthling of the duo held out flat in his palm a queer

five-sided token of strange black metal. Although the stuff wherefrom it was made seemed solid and opaque, a thousand minute stars twinkled and flickered within its murky depths. It was like a fragment cut from the night sky, and it was the rarest of all the rare artifacts in the entire System--a monetary plaque left behind by the mysterious Asterians, the dwellers on the lost planet Aster.

No other mate to this fabulous black coin had ever been discovered . . . and it was the unique means by which Star Pirate chose to identify himself to strangers.

"S-Star Pirate!" gasped the goggle-eyed Uranian. Abruptly his air of careless, glad-handed jollity turned into one of respectful obsequiousness. "Yessir, Mr. Star! While it's against the law for me to sell you a drink this early in the day, there's no law on Mercury says I can't give you and your aide, here, a drink on the house! Name your poison, as the fellow says!"

Phath, licking his lips, ran his eye judiciously down the rows of bottles behind the bar, searching for his favorite Venusian cordial. But Star made a brusque negative gesture with one hand.

"It's too early in the day for a drink," he said, "and besides, we're working on these Fire Troll murders. I understand the first of the Troll's victims had been in your saloon just beofre his fatal meeting with the monster, or whatever it is. But what about the most recent murder--miner called McCallister?"

The fat Uranian shuddered, rolled his black liquid eyes, and made an expansive gesture with one hand, waving pudgy fingers on which far too many gems twinkled and flashed.

"Can I help it if half the spaceport trade prefers my establishment to those of my competitors, Mr. Pirate?" whined Aardh plaintively. "True, McCallister was in here last night . . . drank a couple stiff brandies at the bar, played a hand or two of cards with some of his mates, then ambled off to seek his lodgings."

A few quick questions elicited the simple facts that neither victim, Borden nor McCallister, had behaved in any way peculiar on the nights of their murders, or had spoken mysteriously or done anything else to attract special attention. They had, in fact, behaved as they normally did. Star and Phath then turned to leave The Golden Horseshoe. On sudden impulse, Star turned back at the door.

"Do you know in which direction Borden went that night?" he queried. The Uranian shrugged.

"Sure! Down Settlers' Street towards the Temple . . ."

"And McCallister?"

"Believe he went a ways further--but in the same direction, towards the Temple.--You sure, Mr. Star Pirate, I can't offer you boys a quick one before you leave--just a bit of a pick-me-up, as people say?"

Star declined, politely but firmly, and left the saloon with Phath at his heels. "Where to now, chief?"

"We'll take a look-see at the place where McCallister was found by the medics. The boys from the Patrol will have been over it inch by inch, of course. Still and all . . ."

Star shrugged whimsically, and, briefly, his old, mischievous grin lightened his space-tanned features. As the crime-fighters of an earlier era might put it, The game's afoot . . . and already he was feeling that heady exultation he knew so well, the excitement of knowing that he was on the murderer's trail.

VI. Temple of the Sun

The site where McCallister collapsed after dragging himself on the Fire Troll's trail nearly two

blocks from the narrow alley behind the saloon where he had encountered the fiery monster, was depressingly ordinary. A mere rectangle of muddy soil, of rank and sour dirt pounded by innumerable feet. The site was still marked off by the four spikes and red ribbons the Patrol cops had left. Star scrutinized the immediate vicinity with a variety of miniaturized but surprisingly powerful and sensitive detecting instruments, finding nothing of interest.

He rose to his feet, dusted his knees, and looked around keenly. A dilapidated row of ramshackle sheet-plastic huts with tarpaper or rust-red corrugated iron sheeting roofs were all that was to be seen. The narrow street seemed deserted at this hour. Some of the rundown structures were residences, others were shops. There was a native open-front wineshop which offered the heavy, syrupy mead made from Northlands moss which the natives fancied, and one or two Mercurians lounged within at small tables, tossing dice or snoozing over their bottles. A slovenly native woman polishing mugs watched the two of them with unreadable golden eyes as they went by.

A small grocery store purveyed hydroponic vegetables from the colony farms: turnips, red beans, a paltry selection of wilted greens and overripe fruit, parsnips, potatoes. Another shop, scarcely bigger than a mere booth, sold tobacco-derivatives, licorice, magazines.

At the far end of the block, however, rose a more imposing edifice of glazed mustard-yellow brick set in step-back tiers like a pyramid or ziggurat. Its roof tapered to a blunt spire topped by a revolving jag-edged disc of gold-colored plastic.

"That must be the temple the Uranian mentioned, chief," observed the Venusian. Star nodded.

"The Patrol cops will already have questioned everybody on the street as to whether they saw or heard anything interesting, but let's talk to the temple staff," he suggested. They entered the tall doors of imitation bronze, which stood open as if to welcome devotees and would-be converts. Inside the two found rows of pews with a long aisle between, leading to an altar of the same bright-glazed bricks of the facade, blazing brilliantly under the beams of track-lighting in the ceiling overhead. Behind the altar a huge jag-edged mirror caught and reflected blindingly the rays of light from above.

"This joint would seem to be a temple of the sun, eh, chief?" grinned Phath sarcastically.

"Your Venusian compatriot is completely accurate in his guess, sir," spoke a deep, resonant voice from behind them. They turned to see a tall imposing Earthling with iron-gray hair, attired in yellow robes blazoned on breast and back with the omnipresent solar emblem. He had a weathered, long-jawed face, with blue eyes which bore within their depths a humorous twinkle.

"This is, indeed, the First Temple of Our Lord the Sun, friends, and you are more than welcome! I am Father Langston . . . and if you are wondering that my little flock and I worship anything so simple and obvious as the sun, recall that so did the wise Egyptians and Babylonians and Incas of ancient times, back Earthside. Not only do the beneficent rays of the sun warm our worlds, drive away cold and bitter darkness, bring health and sustain nourishment and life itself, but the sun is the source of all life and the author of our being."

The tall priest made a self-deprecating gesture that was somehow modest and even endearing. "Oh, don't misunderstand me, friends! It is not the actual sundisc itself, the sphere of super-heated gases, that we worship, but That which the sun symbolizes and stands for: light, warmth, goodness--the antithesis of darkness, depravity and evil."

The tall priest grinned suddenly.

"In the days before I--ah--I have to say 'saw the light,' although I deplore the play on words as bordering on irreverence!"--and here he chuckled a little--"I was a mineralogist in the pay of Mercury Metals & Minerals, and as a scientist I knew that the sun was the very source and origin of those precious minerals I was paid to discover. Of course, this was long before I came to realize that Our Lord the Sun was so very much more than merely a great light in the sky, that it was the source of spiritual illumination and the visible symbol of the creative and paternal force in the universe . . . but I suspect my fervor has run away with my tongue, and that you men are here about quite another business--?"

"True enough," nodded Star, and asked a few questions. Father Langston told him that not only had Borden and McCallister not been communicants of his Temple, but that his little flock consisted only of native Mercurians, and, while outworlders were welcome, none had yet converted to the solar faith.

"They are a poor, downtrodden folk," murmured Langston. "Few of them aspire to a good education in the free schools the Colonial Government has established, and fewer yet rise beyond the lowly rank of clerk or computer programmer . . . although some do become jurists, physicians, even spaceship officers. The sun was the object of their ancient faith, and in bringing them before His altars again I am but bringing them home to the most ancient and sacred of their ancestral traditions . . ."

Star queried the friendly priest about the myth of the Fire Trolls, and as to whether Langston believed such creatures might actually exist, hidden away in some remote fastness of the hostile and all-but-impenetrable Sunside. The priest pursed his lips judiciously and would not give an opinion on this.

"In Mercurian myth, they represent the deadly side of the solar force . . . for the sun can warm and bless living things, but it can also kill them swiftly and mercilessly, like any other great natural force... beyond that, I would not care to venture an opinion."

They thanked the gray-haired man and left the Sun Temple, heading back to their ship. Star carried with him the beginnings of a liking for the older man, who might well prove a friend in need.

VII. "Star Pirate to the Rescue!"

Back at the Jolly Roger, Star Pirate and Phath made a few calls to Patrol headquarters for the Mercury/Venus jurisdiction, and checked on a few things with the vast archives of Computer Central, where exhaustive records of every description were stored for instant access.

They dined that evening at Governor Kirkland's executive mansion, where the cuisine was an interesting mixture of traditional Earthling dishes, such as sirloin of beef, asparatus in mustard sauce and chef's salad, and certain exotic native Mercurian dishes, including deliciously crunchy fried moss-cakes, a simmering stew of spicy tubers swimming in fungus-broth, and tasty, tender lichen-balls with Sunside pepper.

The only other guest at the Governor's table was Hardrock, the police commissioner. He was a grim, taciturn fellow, and said little outside of an occasional grunt and nod of the head during the meal. Afterwards, in the Governor's library over a superb Martian brandy and aromatic cigars of golden-ripe Venusian tobacco, the commissioner waxed a little more eloquent.

"Understand you've been questioning that crazed charlatan, who calls himself the 'High Priest of the Sun,'" he said gruffly.

"We have," Star nodded quietly. "But while he may prove to be a char-

latan of sorts, I didn't find him 'crazed' in particular."

hardrock gave vent to a harsh bark of laughter. "Fellow has high degrees in his field from Earth's finest universities," he growled. "Had an excellent job here with Mercury Metals, checking sites in the Belt for unsuspected deposits of rare radioactives. Threw the whole thing over--job, career, everything! --to go bump his forehead on the ground, grovelling before the cursed sun. Mad--and dangerous!"

Star cocked one eyebrow quizzically. "How--'dangerous'?" he inquired in lazy tones. The heavy-faced man scowled at him with eyes like cold steel.

"A fanatic, isn't he? All fanatics are dangerous . . . or can be!"

"Maybe . . . but he seemed sane and normal when I talked to him, and he answered my questions openly and frankly enough," commented Star.

Hardrock showed him a nasty, thin-lipped grin.

"Probably didn't know who you were," the bigger man grunted. "May find it kinda hard to get folks to answer your questions from here on in, Mr. Star Pirate--now that everybody in town knows you're here on Mercury, hoping to bust these Fire Troll murders wide open!"

"What do you mean?" asked Star with a slight frown.

The commissioner chuckled, put down his cigar, and drew a crumpled sheet of flimsy paper from the inner pocket of his uniform tunic. He rapped it with a blunt forefinger.

"That fat fool who runs the Horseshoe must have blabbed his head off," growled Hardrock. "'Cause the afternoon newsfax has your picture smeared all over the front page, under big scare headlines."

And he showed Star the afternoon edition of the Belt City Sentinel. Just as he had said, an excellent likeness of the redheaded adventurer and his Venusian sidekick occupied most of the front page, under roaring headlines that announced--

STAR PIRATE TO THE RESCUE!
Famed Adventurer to Battle
Fire Troll!

Star bit his lip in vexation. It had not occurred to him to ask the manager of the Golden Horseshoe to keep his, Star's, presence on Mercury a secret. . . .

While the Governor's private flyer had picked them up at the field and had flown them to the executive mansion, Star elected to stroll back to where they had berthed their trim little speedster, afoot. It was a mild and splendid night, with a pleasant breeze from the north, redolent of the strange but not unpleasant aroma of native moss-farms and lichen-groves. Stars blazed in the dim amber-purplish haze that was the sky of the Twilight Belt and very few were abroad, except for alert and wary officers on patrol against further enormities by the Fire Troll.

Phath eyed the night sky dubiously.

"Cursed if I can see how anybody can tell night from day, here in the Belt," he complained. "The sky looked exactly the same at noon as it does now . . ."

"Certainly a big change from night and day on Venus, I bet," said Star with a straight face. Phath flushed and bit his lip. As everyone knew, the sun and stars and open sky were completely hidden by the eternal clouds which veiled from view the face of his wet and swampy home world.

"Speakin' of daylight," said Phath, adroitly changing the subject, "you beginnin' to see any yet, chief? This case sure looks mury as midnight to me!"

Star shook his head slowly. "Maybe a glimmer, here and there, but there are still plenty of unanswered questions."

"Like what?" pressed the Venusian as they sauntered along the deserted slum streets near the spaceport.

"Like the chance that neither Bill Borden nor the latest victim, Sam McCallister, actually saw what they both *said* they saw," retorted the redhead. Phath blinked pink eyes at him.

"Then why in the name of Yakdar did they *say* they--?"

"Both men were drinking shortly before they were killed," rapped Star Pirate briefly. "Suppose somebody slipped a drug into their last drink of the night. A hallucinogen, let's say?"

Phath rubbed his hairless jaw reflectively. "Hmm . . . hadn't thought of *that* trick, chief, I gotta admit!" They were just passing the Golden Horseshoe, from whose swinging doors came light and heat and sounds of loud music and louder jollity. The Venusian suggested they go in and ask the plump Uranian who served that last drink to the two murdered men. Star shook his head.

"They might still have the bar tab for McCallister, but the one for Borden would long ago have been tossed in the trash," he said. "No, *that* trail's a cold one--if trail it is."

The blaze and clamor of the bustling saloon faded behind them; the muddy path they trod was completely deserted and steeped in darkness. The two continued on their way, both deep in their thoughts. And then, without the slightest warning--

"*Chief! Look out*--!" yelled Phath hoarsely, his voice raw with shock and surprise, and something very close to terror.

Out of the black yawning maw of a filthy alley lurched into the dimness a monstrously tall, hulking figure. It was naked, its yellow hide glinting with thick scales. Eyes of scarlet fury burned through the murk above a cruel hooked beak; sleek, curved horns swayed against the wan glimmer of the distant stars--

And horrible four-fingered paws, sizzling and smoking with heat, reached out to clutch--and kill!

VIII. The Thing That Would Not Die

With the swiftness and agility of an acrobat, Star sprang backwards, thrusting Phath behind him with one arm while whipping his proton needle from its worn holster with the other hand. He aimed the powerful handgun directly at the center of the ungainly monster's broad chest and harshly commanded it to halt.

"Freeze in your tracks, or I'll fire!" he snapped.

The creature--a blurred and ghostly apparition in the murk--ignored the warning and shuffled forward, grisly paws still extended to sear and maim. The hackles rose at the nape of the tall redhead's neck--he could actually *hear* the crackle and sizzle of the shimmering waves of heat that arose from those four-fingered paws. They must have burned with white-hot temperatures . . . in fact, he could feel the heat from them against his face, like desert sunshine.

He depressed the firing stud. The prong of the needler glowed with green lambent force. A blazing spear of emerald fire lanced from the energy weapon--to catch the Fire Troll full in the center of its shieldlike chest.

But the bolt, which could have burnt a hole through armor steel and would have slaughtered the largest beast that ever stalked the surface of this world or any other--*rebounded harmlessly from the Troll's scaly hide!*

Star could hardly believe his eyes, but he retreated a swift step or two, and fired again--this time smack in that scowling beaked face. The second bolt from his proton needle proved as ineffective as the first had been.

An icy tingle went crawling down the spine of the red-headed adven-

turer. He had done battle with men and monsters on many worlds before now, but always he had relied upon his energy weapons--which had never failed him before.

"Oh, Yakdar's iridium intestines--the cursed thing just won't die," moaned the Venusian at his side. Phath shared the primitive superstitions of his low swamp ancestors, Star Pirate knew, but it was heartening to see that, even though he was half-crazed with terror, the Venusian stubbornly stood his ground. He had his own guns in his hands and was loosing bolt after bolt of green fire at the oncoming monster.

His needlers, too, failed to so much as slow down the lurching, shuffling advance of the gigantic thing. Proton-fire exploded from the scaly chest in showers of crackling emerald sparks that sizzled when they fell to the wet mud underfoot.

Star whirled, grabbed Phath's shoulder--

"No good! Run for it--!" he rapped. The two pelted from the scene: much as it went against their grain to run from any adversary, when you can't kill the thing you're fighting, discretion certainly becomes the better part of valor.

Back at the Jolly Roger, the two relaxed and Phath poured himself a strong drink of fiery liquor. "First time I found anything a needler couldn't kill," muttered the Venusian. He seemed to take the Troll's failure to fall almost as a personal affront.

Star didn't reply: he was busy at the keyboard, tapping into the archives of Computer Central. Obtaining the answers to a few key questions that had occurred to him, the daredevil of the spaceways went to the viewscreen, tuned it to the view outside their trim little speedster, and stared thoughtfully out upon the night.

That next morning, Father Langston was somewhat surprised to find Commissioner Hardrock's runabout parked before the Temple of the Sun, and the commissioner himself desiring entrance, with two officers in two. The solar priest led them into an office where he kept his files and other papers, but before he could do more than exchange polite civilities with Hardrock, other uninvited guests began to arrive. Among these were the Governor himself, Star Pirate and his Venusian sidekick, Phath.

"I've called you all together here because a few things have come up that need clarification," said the redhead. "Father Langston, before you 'saw the light,' as you put it, you were a mineralogist in the employ of Mercury Metals--isn't that right?"

"Yes, certainly," murmured the tall priest, looking puzzled as to where this line of questioning was leading to.

"More specifically, you were asked to look into rumors that a large bed of precious heavy metals or some other rare mineral existed underneath the foundations of Belt City itself--am I still correct?"

"Yes, sir . . ."

"You took core samples, and whatever else it is mineralogists do when they are searching for buried metals, but you found nothing of any particular value--is that correct?" The priest nodded.

Star handed the Governor a fax from the archives of Computer Central. Governor Kirkland studied it bewilderedly.

"It says here that the testing laboratories on Venus examined some core samples from a Dr. Langston on--" he read off the date "--and reported back to him that the samples consisted of almost entirely pure . . . uranium!"

There was a stunned silence. Hardrock blinked slowly. The tall priest flushed but said nothing. The two officers Hardrock had brought with him at Star's request unobtrusively

loosened their proton needlers in their holsters.

"That date coincides, I believe, with the date of the termination of your investigation of the strata beneath Belt City," said Star, and it was not a question.

Langston bit his lip but made no response.

Suddenly, the redheaded adventurer's questions took a totally different tack.

"When you were at college, you studied subelectronics as well as mineralogy," he stated. "You proved to be quite a prodigy in both areas --in fact, while in your early twenties you took out a couple patents in force field technology. Your knowledge of field technics probably came in handy when you went into mineralogy, came to Mercury, and began work--often under hazardous conditions, and then only with the aid of heat-shields, which are a refinement of general force fields, designed to repel radiant energy."

Langston remained unspeaking, but a droplet of perspiration ran down his brow and his fine, intelligent eyes were bright and wary--like the eyes of a forest animal caught in a hopeless trap.

"Heat-shields are heterodyning electromagnetic fields which employ a part of the energy spectrum similar to the frequencies of the molecular binding-force that hold atoms together," Star continued. "We're talking of the so-called 'strong force,' which happens to be the most powerful force in the physical universe. To repel heat, the field operates in a bubble around the wearer of the field projector. It was not too difficult for a scientist of your cleverness to redesign the heat-shield so that it could repel and negate the bolts from energy weapons, such as the proton needle--whose beams are, after all, only heat."

Phath looked stupefied; Hardrock was staring unbelievingly at Star. His mouth hung open.

"Your refinement of a mode whereby at whichever part of the wearer a needler was fired, the mini-computer built into the shield projector calculates the target point and focuses the full power of the screen at that point. Or screens, I should say. When we locate the place where you hide your Mardi Gras monster costume, I suspect we'll find, not one, but probably five field projectors, micro-miniaturized, built into the humped back and extraordinarily deep chest of the costume--"

Phath muttered an imprecation to his tribal deity, and said: "But, Star--the burning paws--how did he work that trick?"

The Pirate grinned that irrepressible boyish grin of his.

"That's the simplest thing of all, a mesh heating-grid concealed just beneath the thin but non-flammable outer skin of the palms. Try sticking your hand against the heating gride of a microwave cooker sometime, if you want to learn how the so-called 'Fire Troll' murdered his victims!"

"And this whole . . . monstrous plot . . . was concocted to serve what purpose?" croaked the Governor hoarsely.

Star sobered. "The uranium field beneath Belt City has to be the largest, most extensive and most valuable ever found. Worth enough to make multiple murder a cheap price to pay. Langston hoped to panic the populace, drive them into flight to other colonies or immigration off-planet, leaving Belt City empty and deserted. He would then, as a 'friend' of the Mercurian natives, who belonged to his phony church, claim the land and become, most likely, the richest man that ever lived."

"'A consummation devoutly to be wished,'" said Langston suddenly, and in a queerly childish voice. Then, shockingly, he giggled, and turned on them eyes from which all intelligence had vanished, leaving

bland idiocy in its place.

Hardrock turned gray and cursed under his breath; the Governor turned his face away, looking sick. Star beckoned to the two officers standing by the door.

"I think he'll go quietly," said the redhead. "But take no chances with him!"

"Right, sir!" snapped one of the men crisply. They hustled Langston to his feet, focused a tangle-field on him which held his arms immobilized, and led him from the Temple.

"Got a question," said Hardrock. "If there is so much uranium ore beneath the city, why didn't our geigerscopes detect it before all this happened?"

"Because right above the uranium ore is a very thick layer of lead and cadmium, the two heavy metals which insulate against uranium radiation," explained Star.

"Devils of Darkside! How did you find out that?" demanded the commissioner. Star shrugged, assuming a bland expression.

"From the lab report on the core sample, of course," he said. "When you drill deep enough to hit the uranium, you have to pass through the layers of lead and cadmium. A 'plug' of those two metals was part of the core sample . . ."

Within the hour, the Jolly Roger rose atop a column of atomic fire and was soon hurtling through space at breakneck velocities, for Haven and home. Having skipped breakfast, except for hasty cups of coffee, Star and his pal relaxed in their little breakfast nook and dawled over steaming hot scrambled eggs, crisp Venusian sausages, fresh-baked bread with Earthside butter, and pots of luscious pod-fruit preserves from the fertile canal-belts of Mars.

"What put you onto Langston in the first place, chief?" queried Phath. "I thought you rather liked the guy."

"I did," admitted the redhead. "When we first talked he was amiable and open and friendly, not knowing who I was. Then he saw the afternoon newsfax and realized I was a dangerous adversary and had to be removed. The timing was too exact, and Langston was the only one we talked to who didn't already know who I was, as did the Governor, Commissioner Hardrock, and that fat Uranian, Aardh, who runs the Golden Horseshoe . . ."

While they lazily talked over the delicious breakfast Phath had prepared, the Jolly Roger flashed down the spaceways, en route to a host of new and exciting adventures.

Continued from p. 26:

Abruptly a streamer of yellow fire erupted from the top surface. I threw myself forward. But before I could reach the thing, it swept through the air straight toward Jamaica Lee. There was a dull explosion and a short scream. Through a fog of yellow smoke I saw the girl reel backward and fall to the cab floor.

"Jamaica!" I cried.

There was no answer. Only the roar of the monorail as it sped deeper into the swamp.

ZEPPELINS OF THE VOID

by Jason Rainbow

Can even galactic vigilante Solar Smith defeat the pernicious pirates of space?

The first time the Nine Worlds reverberated to the name of "Solar" Smith was when the latter walked into a Martian bistro.

The Martian equivalent to a maitre d' was understandably uneasy as he asked for the spaceman's identity and reservation. Smith stood over six feet in height, most of that lean muscle and hard bone. He wore a padded black-and-silver atmo-suit which added to his imposing stature. His bubble helmet was thrown back on its hinge, revealing his hard, scarred features, his jet-black hair and his even blacker eyes.

Those black eyes were the thing that the maitre d' noticed first: the irises were the same reflective black as the pupils, but they were dappled blue--a point which later led to some speculation over the inter-world radio network. Then the maitre d' noticed the look in those eyes and the set of the space flyer's features as he replied finally. "Solar Smith," he had said, "and I'm looking for a man." It was a predatory look; as the maitre d' later stated under questioning, Solar Smith had the "look of eagles" --except the Martian didn't really

say "eagles," but some Martian bird which resembled an eagle, and the radio translated that part.

The second thing that the nervous Martian noticed was the worn atom blaster which hung heavy at Solar Smith's hip as the latter pushed past him, which greatly increased his state of excitement. As Smith's eyes roved around the garish, argon-lit interior, his scarred, horny hand was never far from the weapon's butt.

The atom blaster didn't remain idle long. Solar Smith spied a jack-legged green Jovian--well-dressed--seated in a far corner drinking some concoction. His eyes narrowed at once, and the blaster jumped level to his hip.

The jack-legged Jovian never knew what hit him. That corner went up in an eerie purple flare to the accompaniment of hoarse cries and high-pitched screams, and all that was left of the Jovian was a pile of vitrified bone.

Solar Smith turned on his heel without a word or backward glance, and strode out. No one got in his way.

The ether carried the story within an earth hour, and the echoes of the incident didn't die down for weeks. Especially when an anonymous package arrived at the headquarters of the Nine Worlds Council, on Earth. The package contained irrefutable proof that the slain Jovian--a highly influential personage--had engineered the assassination of the Dreel of Mars not long before. Later, two other bodies turned up--what remained of them, rather--with a note attached, claiming that the remains constituted the actual assassins, themselves.

This note was signed, Solar Smith --not that there was any doubt by that time.

Solar Smith was next heard from in the wake of the pillaging of the Space Zep, Orion Rex.

The Orion Rex was a luxury liner which had been making regular passenger runs between Earth and Venus, and she carried neither cargo nor arms. Midway through her run, contact was lost between her and her ports. The Planet Patrol investigated. The Orion Rex was found, dead in space--her passengers and crew mercilessly slaughtered, the anti-gravity gas sucked from her crystal-cells, and stripped of her anti-ether engines.

It was assumed by the Patrol to be the work of one of the many bands of Space Pirates who preyed on the system's ships. Which band was a question, however. Furthermore, it was known that the asteroid belt which lay between Mars and Jupiter harbored the many bands of pirates, the many bases therein too heavily defended to allow for a raid.

The Planet Patrol vowed swift retribution over the world networks, but privately wrote off the matter of the Orion Rex, which was then considered to be the greatest outrage ever perpetrated by Space Pirates.

Not long afterward, a small electrum rocket, the name Sunscourge burned along her hull, bellied down on the Nine Worlds Council lawn, breaking a dozen laws in the process. A hatch propped open as Council guards rushed toward the ship, guns drawn. They caught a glimpse of a man in a black-and-silver atmo-suit who shoved a bound Venusian onto the sward before taking off.

Under questioning, the Venusian babbled a wild story about being the lone survivor of a pirate band whose asteroid base had been audaciously raided by a lone hand--Solar Smith. Smith, according to the Venusian, had single-handedly atom-blasted the pirate leader, his crew, and destroyed a leviathan corsair Zep which was being built from the salvaged equipment of the Orion Rex.

The Venusian readily admitted that his was the cut-throat crew who had doomed the Space Zep. He

was soundly shaken up, and spoke of the affair as if he hadn't quite believed what had happened. The officials weren't certain as to whether the Venusian rascal couldn't accept Solar Smith's lightning raid, or the fact that he allowed this sole pirate to survive.

Not that the Venusian survived long; he was executed a week later.

The name Solar Smith crackled across the ether again. Even after the incident of the raid died down, wild, speculative newscasts kept Solar Smith's name fresh. The stories didn't accomplish much.

No one knew who Solar Smith was, or where he hailed from. It was assumed that Solar Smith was not his real name, but even that was not certain. Smith was assumed to be an Earthman, based upon eyewitness testimony, but even that was in doubt as the Martian maitre d' had described those jet-black, blue-dappled eyes. Venusians alone in the system possessed such eyes, though Smith did not have the gray hide of a native of Venus. That Solar Smith was a half-breed seemed likely, but there were many of these inhabiting the Nine Worlds.

Smith's motives made for several stories as well. It was thought that he might have been a friend of the Dreel of Mars, which would account for the incident in the Martian bistro. But that possibility didn't explain the pirate raid. One theory had it that Solar Smith was a Planet Patrol officer who, disgusted with red tape and the unchecked pirate menace, had forsaken the Patrol to take up the vigilante trail. While another theory claimed that Smith was an ex-pirate who, sickened with that life, had turned upon his former comrades.

Of course, no one knew for certain. Neither could the Patrol, who had sworn to bring Smith in regardless of the deeds, and find his secret base. In the meanwhile, Solar Smith's exploits increased and he became a legend among the Nine Worlds --and a terror to the wicked.

Jingsara Koor wasn't thinking of Solar Smith, as he watched the great Space Zep Janus being loaded at Port Terra. Not that the husky Neptunian hadn't been giving Smith a great deal of thought lately, but the time for thought was rapidly giving way to future action. For Jingsara Koor was the leader of one of the asteroid-band pirates.

He wasn't dressed the part, true, as he wore an ordinary Earth business suit, but his brutal face--purple with the true Neptunian white mottling--marked him as a cruel fellow. He had viper-red eyes that were never still. They reflected his greed as he watched a huge square box of a thing being hoisted into the Janus' cargo belly.

"What do you suppose that might be, Thole?" he asked.

The rat-like Neptunian who had been addressed shrugged and ventured, "Machinery of some kind; what else would be that size? It's as big as a small house."

The master brigand grunted, "When we are in space, I want you to find out what it contains. It may be worth stealing."

"I thought the anti-gravity gas and ether tubes were all we were to take," Thole objected.

"True," the pirate leader replied, "but we must never close our eyes to other possible gain. You and I should be able to cripple the Janus from within, making our compatriot's attack that much simpler. We will take all the necessary material with which to build our own Zep, of course, but why stop there?" He watched the first lines of passengers boarding the Janus by gravity tube, noting well the flowing movement of the many pink-skinned earth women, and added: "We might even take a prisoner or two, eh?"

Thole licked his thin lips and his ratty eyes grew more wicked. Then he shivered. "But--but what

about Solar Smith? What if he should show up?"

"I expect him to," Jingsara Koor said calmly.

Thole nearly jumped a foot straight up. "What!!"

"I want him to enter into our little game. In fact, I have let whispers of our plans filter through the Nine Worlds, where they may reach Smith himself. He may even be among the passengers, in disguise, of course."

"By Grux!" Thole cursed. "Why?"

"Why? Because to have a Space Zep under my command would allow me to bring all the other pirate bands under my lead--and the destruction of Solar Smith would clinch that. What do you think, Thole? Jingsara Koor, Gompeer of All Pirates . . ."

Thole chuckled appreciatively, but as they left the shadow of the spaceport to board the great Zep, his eyes held a fear-haunted look. He was thinking of Solar Smith . . .

The Janus was a full 700 feet of meteor alloy. Her hull was an oblong, tapered at both ends. She was one of only seven such ships in the System--six, now that the Orion Rex was a dead hulk--the rarety of such ships stemming from the extreme scarcity of anti-gravitation gas, which can be found only on Earth's moon.

The precious gas was enclosed in twelve crystal cells lined up within the Zep's envelope, but lead-lined baffles controlled its natural repulsive action. At high noon, after all passengers had boarded, the gravity tube was retracted, and ray grapples were disconnected from the Zep's blunt nose and vane assembly. The baffles were opened and the Janus floated into the sky like an ascending balloon, no longer subject to Earth's gravity.

When she climbed into the stratosphere, the stern baffles were half-closed, and the Janus' nose pointed heavenward. Stern rocket tubes thundered, providing forward thrust. In a trice, the giant Zep had broken free of the atmosphere and into the cosmic void, with its myriad stars twinkling like the eyes of cosmic spiders.

In space, the rockets shut down and the ether tube was brought into play.

The ether tube hung from the Janus' underbelly, extending from bow to tail. Open at both ends, it enclosed four alloy screws, which sucked in the ether at one end, processed it, and expelled it with terrific force from the stern. The tail section of the tube was a ball-and-socket affair, and this shifted, pointing the Zep toward her planet of destination--red Mars.

Jingsara Koor was playing the part of a suave, wealthy Neptunian businessman, and he was playing it well. He mingled with his fellow passengers in the Janus' stateroom with a practiced ease that belied his cut-throat background. He had sent Thole to check into the cargo hold, incidentally to keep the ratty pirate from discouraging developing friendships.

Koor had already done well in that department. He had, armed with his history, won the friendship--if not the confidence--of the Janus' skipper, Captain Morgan. It had not been difficult. Few people knew that the word "Zep" derived from "Zeppelin" or that the modern Space Zeps were derived from the old airships. Fewer still were aware that the clique of Zep flyers were the actual descendants of the twentieth-century Zeppelin "family," including Captain Morgan.

But Koor knew, and he made good use of his knowledge, engaging the grizzled old captain in a long talk about the development of the Zeppelin from the old lighter-than-air gasbags to the modern space-going super-Zeps.

All of which fitted in with the

pirate's plan to take over the Janus. He had hopes of being granted permission to watch the ship from the control station, where he would be in an excellent position to sabotage her.

But right now, Koor was letting his evil eyes wander over the passengers as they thronged about. There were Martians, Venusians in plenty aboard, with a hugh quota of Earthmen. An occasional Jovian or Mercurian sauntered by. For the most part, the Earthmen were innocuous-looking.

Koor noticed one Earthman who had not removed his smoked goggles as did the others, after they had entered the void. This man was tall, lean, with black hair and, as Koor watched, he stood in one corner of the stateroom engaging a thin Venusian in conversation.

The Venusian was as unusual as the Earthman. He was clad in the long golden robes and skullcap of a Lanth--one of the fierce, knife-wielding mountain tribesmen of Venus. His skin was a slatey gray, and his thin eyes were dappled blue. As Koor watched with interest, the Venusian padded out of the stateroom.

At the same time, Captain Morgan, erect and white-haired, strode into the stateroom. As Koor arose to catch his attention, Captain Morgan's gaze traveled around the room, falling upon a young woman who stood at the observation window. The captain's face registered momentary shock, then pleasure, which Koor took in with some interest. He edged toward the two, who had joined in conversation.

The Janus, outward bound, was passing the moon, whose weird glow bathed the two as it streamed through the long observation port.

The captain's face was seamed, as were those of most spacemen who braved the solar winds, but his pale blue eyes were young and twinkling. "Virginia! My dear, how are you? I didn't know you were aboard."

"Captain Morgan!" the girl exclaimed. Her violet eyes went wide, and a soft smile lighted her full, pleasant face. She brushed back a strand of chestnut hair with a half-nervous gesture. "Why--why, of course; this is your ship! I'd forgotten somehow . . . it's been so long . . ."

"Four years." He took her hand in his and gripped it warmly. "And how have you been? Are you still with the Earth-Mars Press--still a reporter?"

"Yes; but I'm on vacation now." Her violet eyes acquired an odd, veiled look. She asked, and her voice trembled ever so slightly, but not so slightly that both Captain Morgan and Jingsara Koor did not catch it: "Have--have you heard from Carl?"

"No. Not in all the four years since--" He broke off, and his face went craggy.

"It's as if the Universe had swallowed him up . . ." Virginia said. She turned abruptly away, and faced the port.

The moon bathed her face and body, and the viper eyes of Jingsara Koor drank the vision in. She was of fair height, and she carried herself with a certain pride, a self-assurance which accentuated her sturdy limbs, which, in motion, moved with a liquid grace. But now her shoulders were drooping, and her head bowed as if the moonlight was an oppressive thing. She was daringly attired in an open, silver-mesh gown worn over a blue silk halter and skirt. The fulsome curve of her high, pointed breasts showed in profile, sweeping down to a flat stomach and bow-shaped hips.

Jingsara Koor had a yen for Earthwomen, and this one, especially, caused his pale yellow blood to surge within his beefy limbs. With an eye toward future possibilities, he decided to make her acquaintance forthwith. he ambled over, as if casually.

"Ah, Captain Morgan!" he gushed. "Good to see you once again."

The Zep commander responded in kind, though he seemed a little put out by the Neptunian's intrusion. "And you, Jingsara Koor. Permit me to introduce an old friend, Miss Virginia Dray. Virginia, this is Jingsara Koor, who may know more about the old Zeps than even I."

The Earth-girl and the Neptunian shook hands, murmuring politely. Koor's regard was unabashedly frank, but the violet eyes of Virginia Dray narrowed with dislike--something which only made her more desirable in the pirate's eyes.

In an effort to evade the oily Koor, Virginia gazed out at the moon, where tiny blue flashes winked amid the craters. "Oh, look!" she cried. "What are those, captain?"

"Lunar dwendis, Miss Dray," the pirate interjected. "A form of life something like a cross between a flower and an amoeba. Quite striking, are they not?"

"Yes," she breathed absentmindedly. Her eyes had an inward look in them.

Captain Morgan, sensing her discomfort in the presence of the Neptunian, was about to suggest they retire to the bridge, when Koor himself hastily excused himself: "A thousand pardons--captain, Miss Dray --but I see an old friend. Will you both please excuse me? Thank you."

Jingsara Koor fairly stormed out of the stateroom, where he fell upon his aide, Thole, in the privacy of a deserted companionway.

"Waht do you mean by signalling me like that? I told you to keep to yourself when I'm with others!"

Thole was trembling so hard that his teeth chattered. He was a full minute getting his words out: "The--that crate! I checked it--there's a ship inside--a ship!"

"Ship?"

"The Sunscourge!" Thole's voice rose so high it squeaked.

Jingsara Koor smacked one hairy fist into a thick palm. "Solar Smith is on board then! Excellent--excellent! He is very clever, that Smith; he must have smuggled his craft aboard."

"The--there's more. I was seen--by a Venusian--one of those damned hill fighters. He was there, but I escaped him."

"Venusian?" A cunning smile crept over the pirate's broad face. He peered back into the stateroom. There was no sign of the Earthman who had been with the Venusian earlier . . .

A lean, golden-robed Venusian paused before an alloy door and drummed his knuckles cryptically upon it. He waited, and was admitted by a black-haired Earthman, who wore smoked goggles even in the dim argon light.

"Trouble, Tan Cree?" the Earthman asked.

"Yes, my master," the Venusian spit. "A foul rat of a Neptunian I caught skulking about our ship!" He drew a knife out of his robes and gesticulated angrily. "A pirate, if this servant knows his skulking rats! A pirate, I say!"

"Did you follow him, Tan Cree?" The Earthman whipped off his goggles, and the eyes that were revealed sparkled. They were black; their irises a dappled blue . . .

"Yes, my master; I followed that one. He had conference with another Neptunian pig. Their throats I would have cut, had my master not bade me to hold this blade in readiness only!" The long knife described a glittering arc in the argon light.

"There are only two Neptunians aboard, Tan Cree. I know one of them by name. Jingsara Koor. He claims to be a businessman . . ." The Earthman lapsed into thoughtful silence. Then: "How much do you think this skulker learned?"

The Venusian's white teeth sparkled in his gray face, his black, blue-dappled eyes shone with venom.

"That rat had pried a board loose; he has recognized our ship--of this I am certain!"

"This will call for special measures, Tan Cree . . ."

An hour later, two figures lurked outside the Earthman's room, exchanging whispers. They gripped old-fashioned ozone pistols in their fists.

"We can't betray Smith to the captain," Jingsara Koor was saying. "He would be clapped in irons, to be sure, but he would betray us, in turn, to Captain Morgan. This is the best way, just follow orders."

Thole was visibly panicky, but he set himself as his Gompeer knocked upon the alloy portal, saying, "Message, sir."

When the tall Earthman answered, they swarmed over him. The butt of an ozone pistol cracked against his black head and he fell as Thole snapped the portal closed.

"It--it worked!" Thole squeaked. "It worked!" He was beside himself with joy. "Look! He has the eyes! He is Smith!"

"Take his legs," the pirate commanded. "Back to our cabin!" They carried the unconscious form to their own room, and tied him up with Martian spider-silk.

"Kill him!" Thole implored.

"No! The ozone flash would attract too much attention. He will not bother us now. Come! Now is the time! We will strike!" Jingsara Koor doffed his suit and slipped into an atmo-suit, belting on his ozone pistol. Thole did the same.

"What about the Venusian?" Thole asked.

"He will be no problem. Shoot that one on sight." Koor opened a suitcase, revealing a special ether-wave radio. He spoke quickly into it, giving orders. Then he straightened.

"The others are ready; we need only give the signal that we are in control of the Janus. Now let us gain control of the Janus!"

They left their prisoner and made for the navigation bridge, eyes as red as drops of bright blood . . .

The gray Venusian's face was set in hard lines as he again drummed his cryptic knock upon the Earthman's door. When no answer came, his knife flashed out of his golden robes and he applied a magneto-key to the lock.

A hiss escaped between his even teeth when he found the room empty, evidence of a struggle in the overturned and shattered argon lamp. He sheathed his knife; his blue-dappled eyes shone like variegated agates as he pulled a small chest from under the bunk. Within lay the distinctive black-and-silver atmo-suit of Solar Smith. A gray hand closed about the worn butt of Smith's atom pistol . . .

It was late when the two Neptunian pirates strode into the luxurious stateroom of the Space Zep Janus. Thus, there were few passengers about and what few remained were well into their cups. The sight of two atmo-suited Neptunians with drawn weapons startled them nonetheless, but no one moved against them.

Just to be certain, Jingsara Koor shot down one at random, a searing white bolt leaving a wide hole in the victim's chest that stank of ozone.

Koor and Thole took the bridge by storm, while the screams from the stateroom were still trailing off. They began by burning down the first officer and the navigator. The crewmen were not armed, and they quickly raised their hands, standard procedure in these instances.

The bridge was a large, semi-circular compartment set in the Zep's nose. Fully twenty crewmen went about their many tasks here, at the complex controls of the space leviathan. A band-like port gave forward vision into space.

Jingsara Koor pointed toward this port, which was like a grimace on

the face of the Zep. "You are my prisoners! Prepare to be boarded! Resisters will be annihilated!"

All eyes turned toward the port. They saw the four needle-like corsair rockets bearing down upon them. Even the strong among them trembled; they knew their fate.

Space Pirates! The most vicious of interplanetary criminals!

Only one man dared to stand against Jingsara Koor. That was Captain Morgan. He advanced, crying: "How dare you--you scoundrel--"

Thole raised his ozone gun, a wicked smile adorning his ratty features. But his Gompeer interfered. "No, we need him--to keep the others in line." Koor let the captain approach, then he brought a mailed fist down upon the other's white head. Captain Morgan fell unconscious at his feet.

"Thole!" he commanded. The little Neptunian pirate knew his duty; he stationed himself, gun level, before the hatch leading back into the Zep. Then Koor herded the crew off to one side, and took the ether-tube stick in his fist.

The Janus' great engines dropped from a whine to a drone, and she stopped dead in space, her ether-tube no longer expelling force. Koor quickly contacted his confederates, saying: "Board at will!"

The needle rockets closed in . . .

The big Neptunian pirate turned from the controls, his ugly face wearing a sneer of triumph. He opened his mouth to vent his feelings when he spied, behind the astrogator, the flash of a pale leg. His mouth closed and his sneer turned into a leer.

With a rapid movement, he pulled the crouching Virginia Dray from her hiding place by her chestnut hair. She screamed, and Koor laughed deep inside his belly.

"Miss Dray, I'm so very pleased to see you again," he purred. Then he ripped the silver mesh of her gown from her body. Virginia Dray struggled, and the Neptunian wrapped a thick arm around her supple waist. Her body, partially revealed in her brief blue silk undergarments, writhed warmly against his own, and Jingsara Koor, in his passion, almost forgot his surroundings . . .

Then the main hatch crashed open with a metallic noise, knocking the ratty Thole down and spilling his ozone gun from his grasp.

Thole looked back, and decided to leave his pistol where it lay. Jingsara Koor looked up, and forgot the lovely charms of Virginia Dray. A foul Neptunian oath dribbled from his lips.

A terrible sight met the red eyes of the space pirates. A sight they hadn't expected to see.

Solar Smith stood full in the door, the top of his bubble helmet nearly grazing the arch of the hatchway. His stark atmo-suit gleamed and his much-scarred face was a grim mask. If the black bore of his leveled atom pistol was awesome, the look that came into his eyes when he saw the half-nude figure of Virginia Dray in the coarse arms of the space pirate was even more so.

Jingsara Koor saw that look, and cannily took advantage of its implication. He placed the bulbous muzzle of his ozone gun against the girl's temple and rasped: "I will kill this woman if you try to stop me, Solar Smith!"

Smith stood immobile in the doorway. He neither backed off nor advanced, and Koor quickly realized that a stalemate would be the only result of this confrontation; he dared not press Smith to surrender. The lone spaceman would not, he knew . . .

Koor thought quickly. "Thole! Follow!"

Jingsara Koor backed away, dragging the struggling girl along with him. She fought him, apparently oblivious to Solar Smith or anything else. Her halter tore with her efforts.

Thole scrambled for his ozone gun and scampered in his Gompeer's wake. They slipped into an open access tube, which led to an emergency life-rocket. The tube clanged shut; there was a roar; and the torpedo craft was expelled from the Zep's nose.

Solar Smith plunged back into the ship proper, without a backward glance. He worked his way to the passenger compartments, until he located Jingsara Koor's cabin. His atom blaster made short work of the alloy portal.

Beyond the smoking door, another Solar Smith struggled in his spider-silk bindings. When he saw the first, his dappled-blue eyes snapped, and he spoke: "It worked, my master."

"In part, Tan Cree," Solar Smith rapped, as he cut the disguised Venusian free with the latter's own longknife. "They thought they had Solar Smith and their way was clear to take the Janus. I got the drop on them, and would have held it, but Jingsara Koor had taken a female prisoner, and they escaped in a life-rocket."

Tan Cree bounded to his feet, stripping his atmo-suit off, as well as a rubberoid mask to reveal his slate countenance. "We follow?"

"We do."

Solar Smith and Tan Cree raced into the cargo compartment, where a large metal-bounded, wooden crate stood. They pressed concealed studs in the frame, and the crate folded open to reveal the streamlined curves of their electrum rocket, the Sunscourge.

Tan Cree opened the airlock and they warmed the craft up. Fire spurted from tail jets, and the Sunscourge eased slowly into the automatic airlock tube, which allowed life-rockets to pass in and out of the Space Zep.

They flashed straight into a nest of corsair rockets, which scattered in surprise. The corsairs, recovering, swept around and bore down upon the electrum ship.

Within the Sunscourge: "Take the stick, Tan Cree; I'll man the atom cannon!"

"Yes, my master!"

Two pair of Venusian eyes glittered with a vengeful light . . .

The pirate craft numbered four, but that did not bother Solar Smith. He saw that they each possessed a single nose-ozone cannon, which always betrayed itself with a white flash before a bolt could strike. No problem to outmaneuver them, unless they boxed him in. His own modern atom cannon was more than a match for these.

There was a flash. "Tan Cree!" Smith yelled. The Venusian understood and bore the ship over, out of the line of the searing bolt. Smith responded with his atom cannon. A purple flare burst out, and one corsair erupted soundlessly.

Simultaneously, another of the slim rockets crept behind the Sunscourge. Tan Cree caught her out of the corner of his eye. He pulled the stick back against his chest. The Sunscourge abruptly reared up, then swept over and behind, until they were looking into the stern rockets of their erstwhile pursuer.

That rocket, too, went up in bright purple radiance.

The Venusian hissed in satisfaction. "But two more, my master!" he exulted.

Solar Smith nodded wordlessly. In their last maneuver, he had gotten a momentary glimpse of the life-rocket used by Jingsara Koor, but now it was lost from sight. He saw the remaining pirate rockets hanging back, warily in space. Behind them, the great streamlined bulk of the Janus was getting under way, a blue trail issuing from her ether tube.

Perhaps Koor's rocket was behind the Janus, hiding; or perhaps it was within her . . .

Jingsara Koor had just rendezvoused with his compatriot pirates when the Sunscourge burst into space like a thunderbolt. Thole was at the stick, as Koor himself had his

hands full with Virginia Dray, who was desperately trying to gouge his red eyes out.

"Smith again!" Thole squeaked. "What will we do?"

Koor, in his seat, easily shifted Virginia Dray in his arms, putting his face out of her reach. Little remained of her blue undergarments, other than a silken shred which clung, provocatively, to her white hips. Her high breasts heaved with her sobs, but otherwise she bore her captivity stoically, neither threatening nor attempting to placate the piebald Neptunian.

"Smith will not attack us with Miss Dray aboard. Look! He is going after the others--see?"

"We can run!" Thole ventured. "Back to the asteroids. He may not follow."

"Smith?" Koor snorted. "He will not rest until he has tracked us down." His eyes glimmered cruelly. "I have it! Return to the Janus!"

"What? We can't carry away her cells and ether tube in this life-rocket."

"We're not going to strip the Zep; we're going to steal it whole!" Koor thundered. His white-mottled purple hands caressed the Earth-girl's pale flesh at the thought. Virginia Dray shuddered, and bit her lips.

"And how would be get that tub past the Planet Patrol?" Thole demanded.

"I should have thought of it sooner!" the big pirate said. "We will keep the passengers alive--as permanent insurance that our corsair Zep remains unmolested by the Patrol. Why build our own ship, when the Janus will serve? Now, back to the Janus--hurry! That accursed Smith will be busy with those rockets for some time . . ."

But Solar Smith, even as the Neptunian pirate was speaking, was rapidly closing in on the remaining two pirate rockets. They turned tail at the Sunscourge's approach.

"These pirate dogs have lost their fight," Tan Cree laughed. "See how they run?"

"Make them fight," Smith ordered, his gloved fists gripping the atom cannon's controls.

The Venusian sent the trim craft spurting ahead, and they rapidly closed on the fleeing pirates. The needle rockets, losing ground, split and came about, one at each flank of the Sunscourge.

A white bolt crossed the electrum ship's bow, missing. A purple flare answered the bolt. When it subsided, there was only one pirate craft left, and it was too close to the Sunscourge to do anything except fight.

"Keel rockets!" Smith yelled, and under the Venusian's quick gray hands the ship shot straight up, as a white-hot jet of lightning passed under her tail fins, soon followed by the rocketing pirate ship herself.

The Sunscourge veered around, and swept after the pirate ship, whose tube-flame danced redly before their eyes.

Suddenly that flame died, and they found the Sunscourge bearing down on a motionless quarry! A suicide move!

Tan Cree tried to sheer off, but there was no time. Smith coolly triggered his atom cannon, and the Sunscourge flew into a bursting purple flare where the rocket had been. They wondered if she'd emerge intact again.

The electrum rocket made it. Red-hot shards of the destroyed pirate craft rebounded hollowly off her smooth lines, but she pulled free with only minor dents in her hull.

"The gods smile," Tan Cree murmured.

"So far . . ." Smith assented. "But I don't see Koor's rocket. I wonder . . ."

On the navigation bridge of the great Space Zep Janus, things were only just beginning to settle down.

Captain Morgan was still unconscious, and had been laid out in the stateroom, for want of a better place in this emergency. As the first officer was now dead, the helmsman took command. His first command was to order the Janus out of the fighting at top speed.

Most of the passengers and crew, aroused from sleep by the white and purple flashing outside their ports, crowded into the stateroom, to watch the battle.

In the turmoil, no one noticed the returning life-rocket--or gave it any thought--until Jingsara Koor and Thole, ozone pistols leveled and dragging the beautiful Virginia Dray in their wake, reentered the bridge through the access tube that had served their escape so well.

Koor didn't waste words. he shot down half the crew then and there, Thole helping, before he asked for a general surrender. When he did ask, he got it.

The big pirate grabbed the helmsman by the back of his neck. "Set course for the asteroid belt! No tricks, the lives of your crew and passengers depend upon your following orders!"

The helmsman nodded stonily.

"If there are no tricks, you will all live. I, Jingsara Koor, promise this. Now--the rest of you! Into the stateroom!"

Leaving the lone helmsman to his duty, they herded everyone back. They were met by screams of fear as the passengers spied their red atmo-suits with the skull and crossbones design, but no one resisted.

"You are my prisoners!" Koor informed them, as he sent Virginia Dray sprawling into a corner with the others. He wanted her out of the way for the time being; he knew there would be plenty of time for her later . . .

Jingsara Koor and Thole stood side by side, their ozone guns menacing the cowering crew and passengers who were pressing back against the observation port in abject fear. The two Neptunians depicted a picture of utter evil in their scarlet suits. Their eyes were hell-red, and their piebald purple-and-white hides resembled those of lizards.

"We are now heading for the asteroid belt," Koor began, at the same time trying to see past his prisoners into space, for sign of the Sunscourge. He saw nothing. "You will all--"

"So-so-so-so-Solar Smith!" Thole squealed suddenly.

What next occurred occupied but the space of mere seconds, but was vividly impressed upon the brains of the passengers and crew of the Janus, and became a legend in the Nine Worlds.

Jingsara Koor whirled to the far door, where his confederate had pointed, just as Thole, with a rat-squeal of utter terror, broke and ran for the opposite door.

The little Neptunian went through the door; there was a swish-chunk of a sound; and Thole hopped backwards into the room on one leg. He managed three jumps, his arms windmilling, before falling dead in a pool of his own yellow blood. The blood oozed from the stump where his other leg had been.

Tan Cree then entered the room, wiping Neptunian blood from his glittering longknife . . .

At the opposite door, Solar Smith stood, legs spread wide. His scarred face was cold with fury, and his blue-dappled eyes were colder gems.

Solar Smith said nothing, nor did Jingsara Koor. All saw their weapons come level with their hips at the same instant. They saw, too, the weird, blinding flash as atom blaster and ozone gun triggered simultaneously, and the purple-white explosion as Smith's flare and Koor's bolt met--head on!

It was many minutes before the eyes of the passengers and crew of the Janus were able to see again,

and when their sight cleared, all that remained of Jingsara Koor was a pile of blackened bones, in which hot ash sifted slowly.

Of their rescuers, Solar Smith and Tan Cree, there was no sign--nor did anyone, in the excitement, notice that Virginia Dray was also among the missing . . .

Below, in the cargo hold, Solar Smith and Tan Cree were clambering aboard the Sunscourge, their work done. Smith paused in his closing of the hatch when the slap of bare feet sounded out in the companionway.

Virginia Dray stepped into the pale argon light, and stopped. Her soft violet eyes met the hard, blue-dappled orbs of Solar Smith. Smith, with a word to Tan Cree, stepped out to meet her.

A wisp of silk about the hips was Virginia's sole garment, and her full bosom shuddered with some repressed emotion, but neither of them paid any attention to her nakedness.

"Hello, Virginia," he said.

"Hello, Carl," she answered, and her red lips quivered.

"It's been a long time . . ."

"Four years," she breathed.

"You haven't changed, Virginia; you're still as beautiful as moonlight."

"But you have, Carl--or should I say 'Solar Smith'?--your face--those scars . . ." She shivered and wrapped her full arms across her breasts. "I would never have guessed; neither would your father--"

"Leave him out of this," Solar Smith said.

"But he only wanted the best for you . . ."

"He wanted me to become a Zep captain, like his father, and all the generations before that. That wasn't the life I wanted."

"So you ran--away from the tradition, from him--and from me."

"You didn't understand, either," the Earthman said coldly, but his voice, too, held a quivering note.

"Not then, Carl--but I do--now I do. He'll be waking up, soon. Why don't you come back; we can patch things up. It will be like it was before." Her violet eyes were soft and imploring.

Solar Smith, in spite of himself, yielded to an impulse, and kissed her full on the mouth. Then he pulled away, shaking his black-haired head.

"No, Virginia. I'm Solar Smith now. It can't be like it was before; I have a job to finish. Maybe--maybe when the last of the space pirates are no more, I can stop being Solar Smith, but not until that day."

With a half-savage gesture, the man who was Solar Smith to the Nine Worlds clamped his bubble-helmet over his head. "Good-bye, Virginia," he said and reentered the waiting Sunscourge.

As the trim electrum ship slipped into the airlock tube, Virginia Dray watched it depart, her eyes luminous with tears. Her ripe lips framed words that were barely audible to her own ears, never mind those of Solar Smith. They were:

"Good-bye, Solar Smith. I'll keep your secret and--I'll be waiting . . ."

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Robert M. Price, Editor
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WHAT HATH ME?

by Henry Kuttner

He felt the lifeblood being sucked out of him--deeper stabbed the gelid cold . . . then the voice came, "Crush the heart!"

The man running through the forest gloom breathed in hot, panting gusts, pain tearing at his chest. Underfoot the crawling, pale network of tree-trunks lay flat upon the ground, and more than once he tripped over a slippery hole and crashed down, but he was up again instantly.

He had no breath to scream. He sobbed as he ran, his burning eyes trying to pierce the shadows. Whispers rustled down from above. When the leaf-ceiling parted, a blaze of terribly bright stars flamed in the jet sky. It was cold and dark, and the man knew that he was not on Earth.

They were following him, even here.

A squat yellow figure, huge-eyed, inhuman, loomed in his path--one of the swamp people of Southern Venus. The man swung a wild blow at the thing, and his fist found noth-

ing. It had vanished. But beyond it rose a single-legged giant, a Martian, bellowing the great, gusty laughter of the Redland Tribes. The man dodged, stumbled, and smashed down heavily. He heard paddling footsteps and tried, with horrible intensity of purpose, to rise. He could not.

The Martian crept toward him--but it was no longer a Martian. An Earthman, with the face of some obscene devil, came forward with a sidling, slow motion. Horns sprouted from the low forehead. The teeth were fangs. As the creature came nearer, it raised its hands--twisted, gnarled talons--and slid them about the man's throat.

Through the forest thundered the deep, booming clangor of a brass gong. The sound shattered the phantom as a hammer shatters glass. Instantly the man was alone.

Making hoarse, animal sounds in his throat, he staggered upright and lurched in the direction from which the sound came. But he was too weak. Presently he fell, and this time he did not rise. His arms moved a little and then were still. He slept, lines of tortured weariness twisting the haggard face.

Very faintly, from infinite distances, he heard a voice . . . two voices. Inhuman. Alien--and yet with a warmth of vital urgency that stirred something deep within him.

"He has passed our testing."

Then a stronger, more powerful voice--answering.

"Others have passed our testing--but the Aesir slew them."

"There is no other way. In this man I sensed something--a little different. He can hate--he has hated."

"He will need more than hatred--" the deeper voice said. "Even with us to aid him. And there is little time. Strip his memories from him now, so that he may not be weakened by them--"

"May the gods fight with him."

"But he fights the gods. The only gods men know in these evil days--"

The man awakened.

Triphammers beat ringingly inside his skull. He opened his eyes and closed them quickly against the sullen red glow that beat down from above. He lay motionless, gathering his strength.

What had happened?

He didn't know. The jolting impact of that realization struck him violently. He felt a brief panic of disorientation. Where--?

I'm Derek Stuart, he thought. At least it isn't complete amnesia. I know who I am. But not where I am.

This time when he opened his eyes they stayed open. Overhead a broad-leafed tree arched. Through its branches he could see a dark, starry sky, the glowing, ringed disc of Saturn very far away, and a deeply scarlet glow.

Not Earth, then. A Saturnian moon? No, Saturn didn't eclipse most of the sky. Perhaps the asteroid belt.

He moved his head a little, and saw the red moon.

Aesir!

The message ripped along his nerves into his brain. Stuart reacted instantly. His hard, strong body writhed, whipped over, and then he was in a half-crouch, one hand flashing to his belt while his eyes searched the empty silence of the forest around him. There was no sound, no movement.

Sweat stood on Stuart's forehead, and he brushed it away impatiently. His deeply tanned face set into harsh lines of curiously hopeless desperation. There was no blaster gun at his belt; that didn't matter. Guns couldn't help him now--on Asgard.

The red moon had told him the answer. Only one world in the System had a red moon, and men didn't go to that artificial asteroid willingly. They went, yes--but only to

be doomed and damned. From Venus to Callisto spacemen spoke of Asgard in hushed voices--Asgard where the Aesir lived and ruled the worlds of Man.

No spaceships left Asgard, except the sleek black cruisers manned by the priests of Aesir. No man had ever returned from Asgard.

Stuart grinned mirthlessly. He'd learned a lesson, though he'd never profit by it now. Always before he'd been confident of his ability to outdrink anyone of his own weight and size. And certainly this slight, tired-eyed man at the Singing Star, in New Boston, should have passed out long before Stuart--under normal circumstances.

So the circumstances hadn't been quite normal. It was a frame. A beautiful, air-tight frame, because he'd never come back to squawk. Nobody came back from Asgard.

He shivered a little and looked up warily. There were legends, of course. The Watchers who patrolled the asteroid ceaselessly--robots, men said. They served the Aesir. As, in a way, all men served the Aesir.

No sound. No movement. Only the sullen crimson light beating down ominously from that dark sky.

Stuart took stock of his clothing. Regular leatheroid spaceman's rig; they'd left him that, anyway. Whoever they were. He couldn't remember anything that had happened after the fifth drink with the tired-eyed man. There was a very faint recollection of running somewhere--seeing unpleasant things--and hearing two oddly unreal voices. But the memories slipped away and vanished as he tried to focus on them.

The hell with it. He was on Asgard. And that meant--something rather more unpleasant than death, if the legends were to be believed. A very suitable climax to an unorthodox life, in this era when obedience and law enforcement were the rigid rule.

Stuart picked up a heavy branch that might serve as a club. Then, shrugging, he turned westward, striking at random through the forest. No use waiting here till the Watchers came. At least--he could fight, as he had always fought as far back as he could remember.

There wasn't much room for fighters any more. Not under the Aesir rule. There were nations and kings and presidents, of course, but they were puppet figures, never daring to disobey any edicts that came from the mystery-shrouded asteroid hanging off the orbit of Mars, the tiny, artificial world that had ruled the System for a thousand years.

The Aesir. The inhuman, cryptic beings who--if legend were true--once had been human. Stuart scowled, trying to remember.

An--entropic accelerator, that was it. A device, a method that speeded up evolution tremendously. That had been the start of the tyranny. A machine that could accelerate a man's evolution by a million years--

Some had used that method. Those were the ones who had become the Aesir, creatures so far advanced in the evolutionary scale that they were no longer remotely human. Much was lost in the mists of the past. But Stuart could recall that much--the knowledge that the Aesir had once been human, that they were human no longer, and that for a thousand years they had ruled the System, very terribly, from their forbidden asteroid that they named Asgard--home of the legendary Norse gods.

Maybe the tired-eyed man had been an Aesir priest, collecting victims. Certainly no others would have dared to land a ship on Asgard. Stuart swung on, searching the empty skies, and now a queer, unreasoning excitement began to grow within him. At least, before he died, he'd learn what the Aesir were like. It probably wouldn't be pleasant knowledge, but there'd be some satisfaction

in it. And there'd be even more satisfaction if he thought he had a chance of smashing a hard fist into the face of one of the Aesir priests--or even--

Hell, why not? He had nothing to lose now. From the moment he had touched Asgard soil, he was damned anyway. But of one thing Stuart was certain; he wouldn't be led like a helpless sheep to the throat-cutting. He wouldn't die without fighting against them.

The forest thinned before him. There was a flicker of swift motion far ahead. Stuart froze, his grip tightening on the cudgel, his eyes searching.

Between the columnar trees, bright amid the purple shadows, a glitter of sparkling nebulae swept. A web of light, Stuart thought--so dazzling his eyes ached as he stared at the--the thing.

Bodiless, intangible, the shifting net of stars poised, high above his head. Hundreds of twinkling, glittering pinpoints flickered there, so swiftly it seemed as though an arabesque spider-web of light weaved in the still, dark air--web of the Norns!

Each flickering star-fleck--watched. Each was an eye.

And as the thing poised, a horrible, half-human hesitancy in its stillness, a deep, humming note sounded, from its starry heart.

Star-points shook and quivered to the sound. Again it came--deeper, more menacing.

Questioning!

Was this one of the--Watchers? Was this one of them?

Abruptly its hesitancy vanished; it swept down upon Stuart. Instinctively he swung his cudgel in a smashing blow that sent him reeling forward--for there was no resistance. The star-creature was as intangible as air.

And yet it was not. The dazzling web of light enfolded him like a blazing cloak. Instantly a cold, trembling horror crawled along his skin. Bodiless the thing might be--but it was dangerous, infinitely so!

Pressure, shifting, quicksand pressure, was all about him. That stealthy cold crept into his flesh and bones, frigid icicles jabbing into his brain. Gasping with shock, Stuart struck out. He had dropped the club. Now he stooped and groped for it, but he could see nothing except a glittering veil of diamonds that raced like a mad torrent everywhere.

The humming rose again--ominously triumphant.

Cursing, Stuart staggered forward. The star-cloak stayed. He tried to grip it somewhere, to wrench it free, but he could not. The thousands of tiny eyes raced past him, glittering with alien ecstasy, shining brighter and ever brighter as they fed.

He felt the life being sucked out of him. . . . Deeper stabbed the gelid cold . . . louder roared that throbbing tone in his ears.

He heard his voice gasping furious, hopeless oaths. His eyes ached with the strain of staring at that blinding glitter. Then--

The heart of the Watcher. Crush the heart!

The words crashed like deep thunder in his brain. Had someone spoken them--? No . . . for, with the command, had come a message as well. As though a thought had spoken within his mind, a telepathic warning from--where?

His eyes strained at the dazzle. Now he saw that there was a brighter core that did not shift and change when the rest of the star-cloud wove its dreadful net. A spot of light that--

He reached out . . . the nucleus darted away . . . he lurched forward, on legs half-frozen, and felt a stone turn under his foot. As he crashed down, his hand closed and tightened on something warm and living that

pulsed frantically against his palm.

The humming rose to a shrill scream . . . frightened . . . warning.

Stuart tightened his grip. He lay motionless, his eyes closed. But all around him he could feel the icy tendrils of the star-thing lashing at him, drinking his human warmth, probing with avid fingers at his brain.

He felt that warm--core--writhe and try to slip between his fingers. He squeezed . . .

The scream burst out, an inhuman agony in its raw-edged keening.

It stopped.

In Stuart's hand was--nothing.

He opened his eyes. The dazzling glitter of star-points had vanished. Only the forest, with its purple shadows, lay empty and silent around him.

Stuart got up slowly, swallowed dry-throated. The creatures of the Aesir were not invulnerable, then. Not to one who knew their weaknesses.

How had he known?

What voice had spoken in his brain? There had been an odd, impossible familiarity to that--that mental voice, now that he remembered it. Somewhere he had heard it, sensed it before.

That gap in his memory--

He tried to bridge it, but he could not. There was only a quickening of the desire to go on westward. He felt suddenly certain that he would find the Aesir in that direction.

He took a hesitant step--and another. And with each step, a queer, unmotivated confidence poured into him. As though some barrier in his mind had broken down, letting some strange flood of proud defiance rush in.

It was impossible. It was dangerous. But--certainly--no more dangerous than supinely waiting here on Asgard till another Watcher came to destroy him. There were worse things than the starry Watchers here, if legends were to be trusted.

He went on, the curious tide of defiance rising higher and ever higher in his blood. It was a strangely intoxicating sense of--of pure, crazy self-confidence such as no man should rightfully have felt on this haunted asteroid.

He wondered--but the drunkenness was such that he did not wonder much. He did not question.

He thought: To hell with the Aesir!

The forest ended. At his feet a road began, leading off into the purple horizons of the flat plain before him. At the end of that road was a thrusting pillar of light that rose like a tower toward the dark sky.

There were the Aesir. . . .

II

Every spaceman has an automatic sense of orientation. In ancient days, when clipper ships sailed the seas of Earth, the Yankee skippers knew the decks beneath their feet, and they knew the stars. Southern Cross or Pole Star told them in what latitudes they sailed. In unknown waters, they still had their familiar keels with the familiar stars.

So it is with the spacemen who drift from Pluto to Mercury Darkside, trusting to metal hulls that shut in the air and shut out the vast abysses of interplanetary space. When they work outship, a glance at the sky will tell a trained man where he is--and only tough, trained men survive the dangerous commerce of space. On Mercury the blazing solar corona flames above the horizon; on clouded Venus the green star of Earth shines sometimes. On Io, Callisto, Ganymede, a man can orient himself by the gigantic mother planet --Saturn or Jupiter--and in the Asteroid Belt, there is always the strange procession of little worlds like lanterns, some half-shadowed, others brightly reflecting the Sun's glare. Anywhere in the System the

sky is friendly--

Except on Asgard. Jupiter was too far and too small; Mars was scarcely visible; the Asteroid Belt not much thicker than the Milky Way. The unfamiliar magnitudes of the planets told Stuart, very surely, that he was on unknown territory. He was without the sure, safe anchor that spacemen depend upon, and that lack told him how utterly he stood alone now.

But the unreasoning confidence did not flag. If anything, it mounted stronger within him as he hurried along the road, his rangy legs eating up the miles with easy speed. The sooner he reached his goal, the better he'd like it. Nor did he wish to encounter any more of the Aesir's guardians--his business was with the Aesir!

The tower of light grew taller as he went on. Now he saw that it was a cluster of buildings, massed cylinders of varying heights, each one gigantic in diameter as well as height, and all shining with that cold, shadowless radiance that apparently came from the stone--or metal--itself. The road led directly to the base of the tallest tower.

It ran between shining pillars--a gateless threshold--and was lost in silvery mists. No bars were needed to keep visitors out of this fortress!

Briefly a cool wind of doubt blew upon Stuart. He hesitated, wishing he had at least his blaster gun. But he was unarmed; he had even left the club back in the forest.

He glanced around.

The red moon was sinking. A heavier darkness was dreeping over the land. Very far away he thought he saw the shifting flicker of dancing lights--a Watcher?

He hurried onward.

Cyclopean, the tower loomed above him, like a shining rod poised to strike. His gaze could not pierce the mists beyond the portal.

He stepped forward--between the twin pillars. He walked on blindly into the silver mists.

Twenty steps he took--and paused, as something dark and shapeless swam into view before him. A pit--at his feet.

In the dimness he could not see its bottom, but a narrow bridge crossed the gulf, a little to his left. Stuart crossed the bridge. Solidity was again under his feet.

With shocking suddenness, a great, brazen bellow of laughter roared out. Harsh mockery sharpened it. And it was echoed.

All around Stuart the laughter thundered--and was answered. The walls gave it back and echoed it. The bellowing laughter of gods deafened Stuart.

The mists drifted away--were sucked down into the pit. They vanished.

As though they fled from that evil laughter.

Stuart stood in a chamber that must have occupied the entire base of that enormous tower. Behind him the abyss gaped. Before him a shifting veil of light hid whatever lay behind it. But all around, between monstrous pillars, were set thrones, ebon thrones fifty feet tall.

On the thrones sat giants!

Titan figures, armored in glittering mail, ringed Stuart, and instantly his mind fled back to half-forgotten folk-lore. . . . Asgard, Jotunheim, the lands of the giants and the gods. Thor and Odin, sly Loki and Baldur--they were all here, he thought, bearded colossi roaring their black laughter into the shaking air of the hall.

Watching him from their height--

Then he looked up, and the giants were dwarfed.

The chamber was roofless. At least he could see no roof. The pillars climbed up and up tremendously all around the walls that were hung with vast stretches of tapestry, till they dwindled to a pinpoint far above. The sheer magnitude of the tower made Stuart's mind rock dizzily.

Still the laughter roared out.

But now it died. . . .

Thundered through the hall a voice . . . deep . . . resonant . . . the voice of the Aesir.

"A human, brother!"

"Aye! A human--and a mad one, to come here."

"To enter the hall of the Aesir."

A red-bearded colossus bent down, his glacial blue eyes staring at Stuart. "Shall I crush him?"

Stuart sprang back as an immense hand swooped down like a falling tree upon him. Instinctively his hand flashed to his belt, and suddenly the red-beard was shouting laughter that the others echoed.

"He has courage."

"Let him live."

"Aye. Let him live. He may amuse us for a while. . . ."

"And then?"

"Then the pit--with the others."

The others? Stuart slanted a glance downward. The silver mists had dissipated now, and he could see that the abyss was not bottomless. Its floor was fifty feet below the surface on which he stood, and a dozen figures were visible beneath.

They stood motionless--like statues. A burly, leather-clad Earthman who might have been whisked from some Plutonian mine; a slim, scantily clad Earthgirl, her hair powdered blue, her costume the shining sequin-suit of a tavern entertainer. A stocky, hunch-shouldered Venusian with his slate-gray skin; a Martian girl, seven feet tall, with limbs and features of curious delicacy, her hair piled high atop that narrow skull. Another Earthman--a thin, pale, clerklike fellow. A white-skinned, handsome Callistan slave, looking like Apollo, and, like all Callistans, harboring the cold savagery of a demon behind that smooth mask.

A dozen of them--drawn from all parts of the System. Stuart remembered that this was the time of the perioding tithing--which meant nothing less than a sacrifice. Once each month a few men and women would vanish--not many--and the black ships of the Aesir priests sped back to Asgard iwth their captives.

Not one looked up. Frozen motionless as stone, they stood there in the pit--waiting.

Again the laughter crashed out. The redbeard was watching Stuart.

"His courage flags," the great voice boomed. "Speak the truth, Earthman. Have you courage to face the gods?"

Stuart stubbornly refused to answer. He had an odd, reasonless impression that this was part of some deep game, that behind the mocking by-play lay a more serious purpose.

"He has courage now," a giant said. "But did he always have courage? Has there never been a time in his life when courage failed him? Answer, Earthman!"

Stuart was listening to another voice, a quiet, infinitely distant voice within his brain that whispered: Do not answer them!

"Let him pass our testing," the redbeard commanded. "If he fails, there is an end. If he does not fail--he goes into the pit to walk the Long Orbit."

The giant leaned forward.

"Will you match skill--and courage --with us, Earthling?"

Still Stuart did not answer. More than ever now he sensed the violent, hidden undercurrents surging beneath the surface of this by-play. More than he knew swung in the balance here.

He nodded.

"He has courage," a giant repeated. "But did he always have courage?"

"We shall see . . ." the redbeard said.

The air shimmered before Stuart. Through its shaking his senses played him false. He knew quite well who he was and where he stood, in what deadly peril--but in that shimmer which bewildered the eyes and the mind he was a boy again, seeing a certain hillside he had not seen

except through his boyhood's eyes. And he saw a black horse standing above him on the slope, pawing the ground and looking at him with red eyes. And an old, old terror came flooding over him that he had not remembered for a quarter of a century. A boy's acute and sudden terror . . .

Who had opened the doors of his mind and laid this secret bare? He himself had long forgotten--and who upon this alien world could look back through space and time to remind him of that long-ago day when the vicious black horse had thrown an inexperienced boy rider and planted a seed of terror in his mind which he had been years outgrowing? But the fear was long gone now, long gone. . . . Was it?

Then whence had come this monstrous black stallion that pawed the floor of the hall, glaring down red-eyed at him and showing teeth like fangs? No horse, but a monster in the shape of a horse, a monster ten feet high at the shoulder, wearing the shape of his boyhood nightmare that woke in Stuart even now the old, unreasoning horror . . .

It was stamping down upon him, shaking its bridled head, snorting, lifting its lip above the impossible teeth. He saw the reins hanging loose, he saw the saddle and the swinging stirrips. He knew that the only safety in this hall for him was paradoxically upon the nightmare's back, where the hoofs and fangs could not reach him. But the terror and revulsion which the boy had buried long ago came welling up from founts deep-buried in the man's subconscious mind. . . .

Now it was rushing him, head like a snake's outthrust, hissing like a snake, reins flying like Medusa-locks as it stretched to seize him. For one instant he stood there paralyzed. He had faced dangers on many worlds to which this nightmare was nothing, but he had never since boyhood felt the paralysis of horror that gripped him now. It was a child's horror, resurrected from the caves of sleep to ruin him. . . .

With a superhuman effort he broke that frozen fear, snatching for the flying reins, whirling as the monstrous thing swept past him in a thunder of terrifying hoofs. Desperately he clung to the reins, and as the thing rushed by he somehow got a clutching hand upon the saddle-horn and found a stirrup that swung sickeningly when it took his weight.

Then he was in the saddle, dizzy still with the terrors of childhood, but astride the nightmare.

And now, with a sudden intoxicating clarity, the fear fell from his mind. For an instant he sat high on the back of the incredible fanged thing, an old, old terror clearing from his mind. Confidence which was, he knew, his own and no bodiless reassurance drawn from dreams, such as he had felt in the jungle, flooded warmly through him. He was not afraid any more--he would never be afraid. The festering terror buried deep in his childhood had come to light at last and was wiped away. He caught the reins tight and flashed a sudden grin around the hall--

Brazen laughter boomed through the building. And beneath his knees Stuart felt the horse's body alter incredibly. One moment he was gripping a solid, warm-fleshed, hairy thing whose body had a familiar pitch and motion beneath the saddle. Then, then--

Indescribably the body writhed under him. The warm hairy flesh flowed and changed. Cold struck through leatheroid against his thighs, and it was a smooth, pouring cold of many alien muscles working powerfully together in a way no mammal knows. He looked down.

He was riding a monstrous snake that twisted its head to look at him in the moment he realized what had happened. Its great diamond-shaped head towered high and came looping down toward him, wide-mouth-

ed, tongue like a flame flickering. . . .

It laid its cold, smooth cheek against his with a hideous caressing motion, sliding around his neck, sliding down his arm and side, laying a loop of cold, scaly strength around him and pressingm pressing. . . .

His hands closed around the thickness of its throat, futilely--and the throat melted in his grasp and was hairy with a hairiness no mammal ever knew. The motion of the body he bestrode changed again and was incredibly springy and light.

He rode a monstrous spider. His hands were sunk wrist-deep in loathsome coarse hair, and his eyes stared into great cold faceted eyes that mirrored his own face a thousandfold. He saw his own distorted features looking back at him in countless miniatures, but behind the faces, in the great eyes of the spider, he saw no consciousness regarding him. The cold multiple eyes were not aware of Derek Stuart. Behind the shield of its terrible face the spider shut away its own arachnid thoughts and the memories of the red fields of Mars that were its home. With dreadful, impersonal aloofness its mandibles gaped forward toward its prey.

Loathing ran in waves of weakness through Stuart's whole body, but he shut his eyes and blindly struck out at the nearer of those great mirroring eyes, feeling wetness shatter against his fist as--as--

As the horror shifted and vanished, while rippling waves of green light darkened all about him. Now they coagulated, drew together into a meadow, cool with Earthly grass, bordered by familiar trees far away. Primroses gleamed here and there. Above him was the blue sky and the warm bright sun that shone only upon the hills of Earth.

But what he felt was horror.

Twenty feet from him was a rank, rounded patch of weeds. His gaze was drawn inexorably to that spot. And it was from there that the crawling dread reached out to him.

Faintly he heard laughter . . . of the gods . . . of the Aesir. The Aesir? Who--what were they? How had he, Derek Stuart, ever heard of them except as a name whispered in fear as the spaceships streaked through the clouds above that Dakota farmstead. . . .

Derek Stuart . . . a boy of eleven . . .

But--but--that was wrong, somehow. He wasn't a child any more. He had matured, become a spaceman--

Dreams. The dreams of an eleven-year-old.

Yet the hollow, dreadful laughter throbbed somewhere, in the vaults of the blue overhead, in the solidity of the very ground beneath him.

This had happened before. It had happened to a boy in South Dakota --a boy who had not known what lay concealed in that verdant clump of weeds.

But now, somehow--and very strangely--Stuart knew what he would find there.

He was afraid. Horribly, sickeningly afraid. Cold nausea crawled up his spine and the calves of his legs. He wanted to turn and run to the farmhouse half a mile away. He almost turned, and then paused as the distant laughter grew louder.

<u>They</u> wanted him to run. <u>They</u> were trying to scare him--and, once the defenses of his courage had broken, he would be lost. Stuart knew that with an icy certainty.

Somewhere, very far away, he sensed a man standing in a cyclopean hall--a man in ragged spaceman's garb, hard-faced, thin-lipped, angry-eyed. A familiar figure. The man was urging him on--telling him to go on toward that clump of weeds--

Derek Stuart obeyed the voiceless command. His throat dry, his heart pumping, he forced himself across the meadow till he stood at his goal and looked down at the bloody, twisted corpse of the tramp who had been knifed by another hobo, twenty years

before, on that Dakota farm. The old nausea of shocked horror took him by the throat and strangled him.

He fought it down. This time he didn't run screaming back to the farmhouse. . . .

And suddenly the laughter of the gods was stilled. Derek Stuart, a man once more in mind, stood again in the tower of the Aesir. The thrones between the monstrous pillars were vacant.

The Aesir were gone.

III

Stuart let out his breath in a long sigh. He had no illusions about the vanishment of the Aesir; he knew he had not conquered those mighty beings. It would take more than human powers to do that. But at least he had a respite. All but the most stolid spacemen develop hypertension, and there seems to be a curious mathematical rule about that; it increases according to the distance from the Sun. Which may be explained by the fact that environmental differences also increase as the outer planets are reached--and alien environments breed alien ceatures. A great many men have gone insane on Pluto. . . .

This was not Pluto; it was nearer Sunward than Jupiter, but the utter alienage that brooded over Asgard was almost palpable. Even the solidity under Stuart's feet, the very stones of the planetoid, were artificially created, by a science a million years beyond that of his own time. And the Aesir--

Unexpectedly his deep chest shook with laughter. The inexplicable self-confidence that had first come to him in the Asgard forests had not waned; it seemed to have grown even stronger since his meeting with the Aesir giants. Now he stared around the colossal hall, his eyes straining toward the spot of light far above where those incredible columns converged. His own insignificance by comparison did not trouble him.

Whether or not he could have the slightest hope of winning this game--at least he was giving his enemies a run for their money!

A sound from the pit roused him. Stuart walked warily toward the edge. The dozen motionless figures were still there, fifty feet below, and among them was one he had not noticed before--an Earthgirl, he thought, with curling dark hair framing a white face as she tilted up her chin and stared at him.

At this distance he could make out few details; she wore a close-fitting green suit which left slender arms and legs bare.

"Earthman--" she said, in a clear, carrying voice. "Earthman! Quick! The Aesir will be back--go now! Leave their temple before they--"

"Don't waste your breath," Stuart said. "This is Asgard." Whoever the girl was, she should know the impossibility of leaving the taboo world. "If I can find a rope--"

She said quickly, "You won't find one. Not here, in the temple."

"How can I get you out of there? And the others?"

"You're mad," the girl said. "What good would it do. . . ." She shook her head. "Better to die at once."

Stuart narrowed his eyes at the dozen frozen figures. "I don't think so. Fourteen of us can put up a better fight than one. If your friends wake up--"

The girl said, "On your left, between the pillars, there's a tapestry showing Perseus and the Gorgon. Touch the helm of Perseus and the hand of Andromeda. Then go carefully --there may be traps."

"What is it?"

"It will lead you down here. You can free us. If you hurry--oh, but it's hopeless! The Aesir--"

"Damn the Aesir," Stuart snarled. "Wake up the others!" He whirled and ran toward the distant wall, where he could see the Perseus tapestry, brown and gold, a huge curtain

between two columns.

If the Aesir saw, they made no move. . . .

Stuart's lips twisted in a bitter smile. The crazy confidence had not left him, but he was conscious of a reassuring warmth; at least he was no longer completely alone. That would help. Between the worlds, and on the desolate planets that swing along the edge of the System, loneliness is the lurking terror, more horrible than the most exotic monster ever spawned by the radioactive Plutonian earth.

He touched the tapestry twice; it swept away from him, and a staircase was visible, leading down through stone or metal--he could not tell which. Stuart fought back the impulse that urged him to race down those curving spiral steps. The girl had spoken of traps.

He went warily, testing each tread before he put his weight upon it. Though he did not think that the snares of the Aesir would be so simple.

At the bottom, he emerged into a vaulted chamber, tiny by comparison with the one he had left. It was oval, domed ceiling and walls and floor shining with a milky radiance--except at one spot.

There he saw a door--transparent. Through it he looked into the pit. He was on a level with the floor of that shaft now; he could see the dozen figures still standing motionless in a huddled group, and a few feet beyond the glassy pane was the Earthgirl. She was looking directly at him, but her dark eyes had a blind seeking, as though the door was opaque from her side.

Stuart paused, his hand on the complicated mechanism that, he guessed, would open the portal. His hard, dark face was impassive, but he was conscious of an unfamiliar stirring deep within him. From above, he had not seen the girl's beauty.

He saw it now.

She couldn't be an Earthgirl--entirely. She must be one of those disturbingly lovely interplanetary halfbreeds. Earth-blood she had, of course, and predominantly, but there was something more, the pure essence of beauty that blazed through her like a flame kindled in a lamp of crystal. In all his wanderings between the worlds, Stuart had never seen a girl as breathtakingly lovely as this one.

His hand moved on the controls: the door slid silently open. The girl's eyes brightened. She gave a little gasp and ran toward him. Without question she sought refuge in his arms, and for a moment Stuart held her--not unwillingly.

He thrust her away gently.

"The others."

She said, "It's useless. The paralysis--"

Stuart scowled and stepped across the threshold into the pit. Uneasiness crawled along his spine as he did so. The Aesir might be watching from above, or--or--

There was nothing. Only dead silence, and the uneven breathing of the girl as she stood in the doorway watching. Stuart stopped before the leather-clad Earthman and tested a burly arm. The man stood frozen, his flesh cold and hard as stone, his eyes staring glassily. He was not even breathing.

So with the others. Stuart grimaced and shrugged. He turned back toward the girl, and felt a pulse of relief as he stepped into the shining chamber. He might be no safer here, but at least he wasn't so conscious of inhuman eyes that might be watching from above. Not that solid stone might be any barrier to the Aesir's probing gaze. . . .

The girl touched the mechanism; the door slid silently shut. "It's no use," she said. "The paralysis holds all the others. Only I could battle it--a little. And that was because--"

"Save it," Stuart said. He turned toward the door by which he had entered, but an urgent hand gripped

his wrist.

"Let me talk," the quiet voice said. "We're as safe here as anywhere. And there may be a way--now that I can think clearly again."

"A way out? A safe way?"

There was a haunted look in her dark eyes. "I don't know. I've lived here for a long time. The others--" she pointed toward the door of the pit. "The sacrifices were brought to Asgard only yesterday. But I've been here many moons. The Aesir kept me alive for a bit, to amuse them. Then they tired, and I was thrown in with the others. But I learned a little. I--I--no one can dwell here in the Aesir stronghold without--changing a little. That's why the paralysis didn't hold me as long as it holds the others."

"Can we save them?"

"I don't know," she said, with a small, helpless shrug. "I don't even know if we can save ourselves. It's been so long since I was brought to Asgard that I--I scarcely remember my life before that. But I have learned a little of the Aesir--and that may help us now."

Stuart watched her. She tried to smile, but not successfully.

She said, "I'm Kari. The rest--I've forgotten. You're--"

"Derek Stuart."

"Tell me what happened."

"We haven't time," Stuart said impatiently, but Kari shook her head.

"We'll need weapons, and I must know--first--if you can use them. Tell me!"

Well, she was right. She had knowledge that Stuart needed. So he told her, very briefly, what he remembered.

She stared at him. "Voices--in your mind?"

"Something like that. I don't know--"

"No. No. Or--wait--" He tried to focus his thoughts upon a far, faint calling that came from infinite distances. His name--an urgent summons--

It faded and was gone.

"There's nothing," Stuart said finally, and Kari moved her shoulders uneasily.

"No help there, then."

"Tell me one thing. What's the Aesir's power? Hypnotism?"

"No," Kari said, "or not entirely. They can make thoughts into real things. They are--what the race of man will evolve into in a million years. And they have changed, into beings utterly alien to humans."

"They looked human--giants, though."

"They can assume any shape," Kari told him. "Their real form is unimaginable. Being of pure energy . . . mental force . . . matrixes of electronic power. They were striking at you through your mind."

Stuart said, "I wondered why they didn't set some of their Watchers on me."

"I don't know why they didn't," Kari frowned. "Instead, they hammered at your weaknesses--old fears that hung on to you for years. Experiences that frightened you in the past. They sent your mind back into that past--but you were too strong for them."

"Too strong--?"

"Then. They have other powers, Stuart--incredible powers. You can't fight them alone. And you must fight them. In a thousand years no one has dared--"

Stuart remembered something. "Two dared--once."

Kari nodded. "I know. I know the legends, anyway. About John Starr and Lorna. The great rebels who first defied the Aesir when the tyranny began. But they may have been only legendary figures. Even if they were real--they failed."

"Yes, they failed. And they're a thousand years dead. But it shows something--to me at least. Man wasn't to be a slave to these monsters. Rebellion--"

Kari watched him. Stuart's eyes were shadowed.

"John Starr and Lorna," he whis-

pered. "I wonder what their world was like, a thousand years ago? We've got all the worlds now, all the planets of the System from Jupiter to the smallest asteroid. But we don't rule them, as men owned their own Earth in those days. We're slaves to the Aesir."

"The Aesir are--are gods."

"John Starr didn't think so," Stuart said. "Neither do I. And at worst I can always die, as he did. Listen, Kari." He gripped her arms. "Think. You've lived here for a while. Is there any weapon against those devils?"

She met his gaze steadily. "Yes," she said. "But--"

"What is it? Where?"

Abruptly Kari's face changed. She pressed herself against Stuart, avoiding his lips, simply seeking--he knew--warmth and companionship. She was crying softly.

"So long--" Kari whispered, her arms tight around him. "I've been here so long--with the gods. And I'm so lonely, Derek Stuart. So lonely for green fields and fires and the blue sky. I wish--"

"You'll see Earth again," Stuart promised. At that Kari pulled away. Her strange half-breed loveliness was never more real than then, with tears sparkling on her dark lashes, and her mouth trembling.

She said, a catch in her voice, "I'll show you the weapon, Stuart."

She turned toward the wall. Her hand moved in a quick gesture. A panel opened there in the glowing surface.

Kari reached in, and when she withdrew her arm, it was as though she held a torrent of blood that poured down from her grip. It was a cloak, Stuart saw, made of some material so fine that it rippled like water. Its crimson violence was bizarre against the cool green of Kari's garment.

"This cloak--" she said. "You must wear it if we face the Aesir."

Stuar grimaced. "What good is a piece of cloth? A blaster gun's what I want."

"A blaster wouldn't help," Kari said. "This is more than a piece of cloth, Stuart. It is half alive--made so by the sciences of the Aesir. Wear it! It will protect you."

She swung the great, scarlet billows about Stuart's shoulders. Her fingers fumbled with the clasp at his throat. And then--

She lies!

The desperate urgency of the thought roared through Stuart's mind. He knew that soundless voice, so sharp now with violent intensity. His hands came up to rip the cloak from him--

He was too late. Kari sprang back, wide-eyed, as the fastenings of the cloak tightened like a noose about Stuart's neck. He felt a stinging shock that ran like white fire along his spine and up into his brain. One instant of blazing disorientation, a hopeless, despairing cry in his mind--a double cry, as of two telepathic voices--and then, his muscles too weak to hold him, he crashed down upon the floor.

It was not paralysis. He was simply drained of all strength. There was pressure about his throat, cold flames along his spine and in his brain, and he could feel the texture of the cloak wrapped about him, striking through his spaceman's garb--tingling, sentient, half-alive!

He whispered an oath. Kari's face had not changed. He read something strangely like pity in her dark eyes.

From the gap in the wall whence she had drawn the cloak came a figure, cloaked in black, a jet cowl hiding its head and face completely. It was taller than the girl by a foot. It shuffled forward with an odd, rocking gait, and paused near her.

Stuart whispered, "I--should have remembered. The--the Aesir can change their shapes. Those giants I saw weren't real. And neither are you--not even human!"

Kari shook her head. "I am real,"

she said slowly. "He is not." She gestured toward the black-cloaked figure. "But we are all of the Aesir. And, as we thought, you were sent by the Protectors. Now your power is gone, and you must walk the Long Orbit with the other captives."

The cowled creature came forward. It bent, but Stuart could see nothing in the shadow of the hood. A fold of cloth writhed out and touched Stuart's forehead.

Darkness wrapped him like the shroud of the scarlet cloak.

IV

For a long time he had only his thoughts for company. They were not pleasant. He felt alone, as he had never felt so utterly lonely and deserted before anywhere in the System. Now he realized that ever since his landing on Asgard, he had had companionship of a sort--that the twin voices murmuring in his brain had been more real than he had realized. A living warmth, a sense of--of presence--had been with him then.

But it was gone now. Its absence left a black void within him. He stood alone.

And Kari . . . If he saw her again when his hands were free, he would kill her. He knew that. But--but her shining smile lightened the darkness that engulfed him now. He had never seen loveliness like Kari's, and he had known so many women, so many, too many. . . . A man who has fought his way Sunward and back again by way of Pluto's chasmed midnight is not so easily misled by the smile of a pretty woman.

Kari was no ordinary woman--God knew she was not! Perhaps not even human, perhaps not even real at all. It might be that very touch of alienage that had stamped her shining image upon his memory, but he could not put the image aside now. He saw her clearly in the darkness of his captivity and the deeper dark of his loneliness, now that the voices were stilled. Lovely, exotic, with the eyes full of longing and terror--what lies they told!--and that lovely, that dazzling smile.

Bitterness made a wry taste in his mouth. Either she was one of the Aesir, or she served them. Served them well. A knife in the heart was the only answer he had for her, and he meant to give her that edged answer if he lived. But she was so very lovely. . . .

Slowly the veil of darkness lifted. He saw a face he had seen before--the harsh, seamed features of the burly Earthman in the pit. And beyond him, the slim Martian girl. All motionless, standing like statues beside him . . . beside him! For Stuart was one of them now. He was in the pit, with the other captives.

Sensation came back slowly. With it came a tingling, a warm vibration along his spine . . . about his throat . . . inside his brain. He could not move, but at the corner of his range of vision flamed a crimsonness--the cloak. He still wore it.

He wondered if the other captives could see him, if their minds were as active as his in their congealed bodies. Or whether the chill of deathlike silence held their brains with their frozen limbs.

A slow, volcanic fury began to glow within him. Kari--traitor and murderess! Was she Aesir? Was she Earth-born? And that black-cloaked, cowled creature . . . which was not real. Another projector of the Aesir, as the giants had been?

You were sent by the Protectors.

Memory of Kari's phrase came back to Stuart now. And with it, as though he had somehow unbarred a locked gate, opened it mere crak, came a--a whispering.

Not audible. Faint, far away, like the shadow of a wind rustling ghosts of autumn leaves, the murmur rose and fell . . . calling him.

The scarlet cloak moved . . . writhed . . . flowed more closely about him. Fainter grew the voices.

Stuart strained after them. His soul sprang up . . . reaching toward those friendly, utterly inhuman whispers that came from nowhere.

A dull lethargy numbed him. The cloak drew tighter. . . .

He ignored it. Deep in the citadel of his mind, he made himself receptive, all his being focused on that--that strange calling from beyond.

And, suddenly, there were words. . . .

"Derk Stuart. Can you hear us? Answer!"

His stiff lips could not speak, but his thoughts formed an answer. And, rising and falling as though the frequency of that incredible telepathy pulsed and changed continually, the message came--

"We have lost. You have lost too, Stuart. But we will stay with you--we must stay now--and perhaps your death will be easier because of that. . . ."

"Who are you?" he thought, oddly awed by the personality he sensed behind that voice that was really two voices.

"There is little time." The--sound?--faded into a thin whisper, then grew stronger. "The cloak makes it hard for us to communicate with you. And now we can give you none of our power at all. It is a monstrous thing--a blasphemy such as only the Aesir would create. Half-alive--it makes an artificial synapse between the individual and outside mental contacts. We cannot help you--"

"Who are you?"

"We are the Protectors. Listen now, Stuart, for soon you must walk the Long Orbit with the others. We removed some of your memories, so the Aesir could not read your mind and have time to prepare themselves--we hoped we might destroy them this time. But--we have failed again. Now--we give you your memories back."

Like a slowly rising tide, Stuart's past began to return. He did not question how this was done; he was too busy lifting the veil that had darkened his mind since--since that night at the Singing Star in New Boston. A few drinks with the tired-eyed man, and then darkness--

But the curtain was lifting now. He remembered . . .

He remembered a tiny, underground room, with armed men--not many of them--staring at him. A voice that said, "You must either join us or die. We dare run no risks. For hundreds of years a tiny band of us has survived, only because the Aesir did not know we existed."

"Rebels?" he had asked.

"Sworn to destroy the Aesir," the man told him, and an answering glow burned briefly in the eyes of the others.

Stuart laughed.

"You have courage," the man said. "You'll need it. I know why you laugh. But we don't fight alone. Have you ever heard of the Protectors?"

"Never."

"Few have. They aren't human, any more than the Aesir are. But they are not evil. They're humanity's champions. They have sworn to destroy the Aesir, as we have--and so we serve them."

"Who are they, then? What are they?"

"No man knows," the other said quietly. "Who--and where--they are is a secret they keep to themselves. But we hear their messages. And once in a lifetime, not oftener, they tell us where we may find some man they have winnowed the planets to discover. In our lifetime, Stuart, you are the man."

He gaped at them. "Why? I--"

"To be a weapon for the Protectors --a champion for mankind. The Protectors are so far beyond humanity they cannot fight our battles in their own forms. They need a--a vessel into which they can pour their power. Or--call it a sword to wield

against the Aesir. They have searched the worlds over for a long while now, and you--" The man hesitated, looking narrowly at Stuart. "You are the only vessel they found. You have a great destiny, Derek Stuart."

He had scowled at them. "All right, suppose I have. What do they offer?"

The man shook his head. "Death--if you're lucky. No man before you has ever won a battle for the Protectors. You know that--the Aesir still rule! Every chance is against you. In a thousand years no man has won the gamble. But this is greater than you or us, Derek Stuart. Do you think you have any choice?"

Stuart stared the other man in the eyes. "There's no chance?"

The leader smiled. All mankind's indomitable hope was in the smile.

"Would the Protectors have spent all their efforts, and ours, to find you if there were no hope? They have mighty and terrible powers. With the right man for their vessel, they could be stronger than the Aesir. No man could stand alone against the Aesir. The Protectors could not stand alone. But together --sword and hald and brain welded into one--yes, Stuart, there's a chance!"

"Then why have the others failed?"

"No one has yet been quite strong enough. Only once in forty years--fifty--is a man born who might, with luck, have the courage and the strength. Look at us here--do you think we would not offer ourselves gladly? Instead, the Protectors guided us to you. If you are willing to let them establish contact with your mind, enter it, possess it--there's a chance the Aesir can be destroyed. There's a chance that man's slavery may be ended!" His voice shook with that mighty hope.

Stuart glanced around at the ardent, fanatical faces, and something in him took a slow fire in theirs. A deep and vital purpose, as old as humanity--how many times before in Earth's history had men of Earth gathered in hidden rooms and sworn vows against tyranny and oppression? How many times before had Earthmen dedicated themselves and their son's sons, if need be, to the old, old dream that though men may die, mankind must in the end be free?

Here in this crowded room the torch of freedom still burned, despite the hell of slavery under which the worlds toiled now.

He hesitated.

"It won't be easy, Stuart," the man warned. "A sword-blade must be hammered on the anvil, heated in flame, before it's tempered. The Protectors will test you--so that your mind may be toughened to resist the attacks of the Aesir later. You will suffer. . . ."

He had suffered. Those agonizing, nightmare dreams in the forest, the phantoms that had tortured him--other trials he did not want to remember. But there had been no flaw in the blade. In the end--the Protectors had been satisfied, and had entered his mind--maintaining contact that still held, though thinly now.

And the voices he heard still whispering within him were the voices of his mentors. . . .

"We took your memories from you. So that the Aesir could not read too much in your mind, and be forewarned. Now that does not matter, and you will be stronger with your memory restored. But when you let the girl clasp the cloak about you--that was failure."

"If I could move," Stuart thought. "If I could rip it off--"

"It is part of you. We do not know how it can be removed. And while you wear it, we cannot give you our power."

Stuart said bitterly, "If you'd given me that power in the first place--"

"We did. How do you think you survived the first testing by the Aesir? And it is dangerous. We must gauge it carefully, so that we do not transmit too much of our mental energy to you. You are merely

human--if we let you draw on a tenth of our power, that would burn you out like a melting wire under a strong current."

"So--what now?"

"We have lost again. You have lost, and we are sorry. All we can do is give you an easy death. We possess you now, mentally; if we should withdraw from your brain, you would die instantly. We will do that whenever you ask. For the Aesir will kill you anyhow now, and not pleasantly."

"I'm not committing suicide. As long as I live, I can still fight."

"We also. This has happened before. We have chosen and possessed other champions, and they have failed. We withdrew from their minds before the Aesir . . . killed . . . so that we could survive to try again. To wage another battle. Some day we will win. Some day we shall destroy the Aesir. But we dare not cling to our broken swords, lest we too be broken."

"So when the going gets tough you step out!"

Stuart sensed pity in the strange twin voice. "We must. We fight for the race of man. And the greatest gift we can give you now is quick death."

"I don't want it," Stuart thought furiously. "I'm going to keep on fighting! Maybe that's why you've always failed before--you were too ready to give up. So I'll die if you step out of my mind? Well--it's a lousy bargain!"

There was no anger, only a stronger overtone of pity in the still voice.

"What is it you want, Stuart?"

"Nothing from you! Just let me go on living. I'll do my own fighting. There'll be time enough to take a powder when the axe falls. I'm asking you simply this--keep me alive until I've had another crack at the Aesir!"

A pause. "It is dangerous. Dangerous for us. But--"

"Well?"

"We will take the risk. But understand--we must leave you if the peril grows too great. And will--inevitably."

"Thanks," Stuart said, and meant it. "One thing. What about Kari? Who is she?"

"A hundred years ago she was human. Then she was brought here, and the Aesir possessed her--as we possess you. She has grown less human in that time, as the alien grows stronger within her. She has only faint memories of her former life now, and they will vanish soon. Contact with the Aesir is like an infection--she will grow more and more like them. Perhaps, eventually, become one of them."

Stuart grimaced. "If the Aesir should withdraw from her--"

"She would die, yes. Her own life-force has been sapped too far. You and she are kept alive only as long as the bond of possession holds."

Nice, Stuart thought. If the Aesir were destroyed, Kari would die with him. And if he faced doom, he too would die, as the Protectors withdrew to avoid sharing his fate.

Hell--what did he care whether Kari lived or died? It was only the glamor of half-alienage that had drawn him to the girl. A dagger in her throat--

Besides, he was certainly facing doom now.

"All I can do--" he said--and stopped abruptly. He was speaking aloud. Patiently the twin voice in his brain waited for him to continue.

Slowly he flexed his arms. He tilted back his head, staring up at the rim of the pit fifty feet above him. He could see the titan pillars rising toward the roof of that mighty tower, incredibly far above. But there was no sign of life.

"I can move," he said. "I--"

Struck by a new thought, he gripped the folds of the cloak. It was nauseously warm and vibrant. It

seemed to move under his hands. He jerked at it, and felt a twinge of agonizing pain along his spine and about his throat, while a white-hot lance stabbed into his skull.

"If I could get rid of this--you could help me?"

"We could give you our power, to use against the Aesir. But we do not know how to remove the cloak."

"I don't either," Stuart growled, and paused as a movement caught his eye. The muscular Earthman near him was stirring.

He turned slowly. Beyond him the Martian girl swayed her feathery-crested head and lifted supple, slender arms. And the others--all about Stuart they were wakening to motion.

But no life showed in their dull eyes. No understanding. Only a blind, empty withdrawal.

They turned, trooped toward the wall of the pit . . . toward an arched opening that was gaping suddenly.

"The Long Orbit," said the voice in Stuart's mind.

"What's that?"

"Death. As the Aesir feed. They feed on the life-force of living organisms."

"Is that the only way out?"

"The only way open to you. Yes."

Stuart went slowly after the others. They had crossed the threshold now, and were pacing along a tunnel, lit with cold blue brilliancy, that curved very gradually toward the left. Behind him a panel closed.

The cloak swayed like a great bloodstain behind him, moving in a motion not entirely caused by Stuart's movements. He tried again to unfasten it, but the clasp at his throat only drew tighter. And the tingling sensation increased along his spine.

An artificial synapse . . . blocking his nerve-ends so that he could not draw upon the Protectors' power. . . .

At his left was an alcove in the tunnel wall. It was filled with coagulated light . . . bright with glaring flames . . . flame-hot. Within that white curtain stirred swift movement, like the leaping of fires. Above the recess a symbol was embossed in the stone. The sign of Mercury.

"Mercury," said a voice in Stuart's mind. "The Servant of the Sun. The Swift Messenger. Mercury, that drinks the Sun's fires and blazes like a star in the sky's abyss. First in the Long Orbit--Mercury."

The crowd of prisoners, dull-eyed, swayed to and fro, a ripple of excitement rustling through them. Abruptly the Martian girl darted forward--

Was engulfed in the milky flames.

Stood there, while curdled opalescence veiled her. On her face sheer horror, as--

"The Aesir feed," the voice whispered. "They drink the cup of her life . . . to its last dregs."

The captives were moving again. Silently Stuart followed them along the tunnel. Now another recess showed in the wall.

Blue . . . blue, this time, as hazy seas of enchantment . . . misted with fog, with slow shifting movement within it. . . .

"The sign of Venus," said the voice. "The Clouded world. Planet of life and womb of creation. Ruler of mists and seas--Venus!"

The Earthman was drawn into the alcove. Stood there, while azure seas washed higher and higher about him. Through that glassy veil his face glared, stiff with alien fear. . . .

The sacrifices went on.

There was no alcove, no symbol for Earth. The Aesir had forgotten the world that had been their place of birth.

"Mars! Red star of madness! Ruler of man's passion, lord of the bloody seas! Where scarlet sands run through Time's hourglass--Mars, third in the Long Orbit!"

The crimson glow of a dusty ruby . . . the face of a Venusian,

strained, twisted in agony . . . the hunger of the Aesir. . . .

"The Little Worlds! The Great Belt that girdles the Inner System! The Broken Planet--"

Tiny goblin lights, dancing and flickering, blue and sapphire and dull orange, wine-red and dawn-yellow--

The hunger of the Aesir.

"Jupiter! Titan! Colossus of the Spaceroads! Jupiter, whose mighty hands seize the ships of man and drag them to his boiling heart! The Great One-fifth in the Long Orbit!"

The hunger of the Aesir.

"Ringed Saturn light-crowned! Guardian of the outer skies! Saturn--"

Uranus . . . Neptune. . . .

Pluto.

The hunger of the Aesir. . . .

Beyond Pluto, dark worlds Stuart had not known. Until finally he was alone. The last of his companions had been drawn into one of the vampire alcoves of the Long Orbit.

He went on.

There was another recess in the wall at his left. It was filled with night. Jet blackness, cold and horrible, brimmed it.

Something like an invisible current dragged him forward, though he fought with all his strength to resist. Instinctively he sent out a desperate call to the Protectors.

"We cannot aid you. We must leave you . . . you will die instantly."

"Wait! Don't--don't give up yet! Give me your power--"

"We cannot. While you wear the cloak."

The edge of blackness touched Stuart with a frigid impact. He felt something, avid with horrible hunger, strain forward from the alcove, reaching for him. The cloak billowed out--

Sweat stood out on Stuart's face. For, suddenly, he had seen the way. It might mean death, it would certainly mean frightful agony--but he could go down fighting. If the cloak could not be removed in any other way--perhaps it could be ripped off!

He gripped the half-living fabric at its bottom, brought his arm behind him--and tore the horror from him!

Stark, abysmal nerve-shock poured like a current of fire up his spine and into his brain. It was like tearing off his own skin. Sick, blind, gasping dry-throated sobs, Stuart stumbled away from the black alcove, tearing at the cloak. It tried to cling to him--

He ripped it away--hurled it from him. And as it fell--it screamed!

But he was free.

For an instant sheer weakness overwhelmed him. Then into him poured a racing, jubilant torrent of strength, of mighty, intoxicating power that seemed to heal his wounds and revivify him instantly.

Into him surged the power of the Protectors!

From the alcove a finger of darkness tendrilled out. He was borne away from it . . . along the passage. Dimly, through drifting mists, he sensed that he was moving up a ramp . . . through a wall that seemed to grow intangible as he approached it . . . up and up . . .

He was in the hall of the Aesir.

Above him the cyclopean pillars towered, dwarfing the thrones set between them. Before him hung the shifting wall of light.

He was carried toward it--through it.

He stood on a black dais. Facing him was the cloaked, cowled figure he had last seen with Kari.

And beside the Aesir stood Kari!

The creature lifted its arm . . . a red flame spouted toward Stuart. Sudden, mocking laughter spilled from his lips. He no longer fought alone. The tremendous power of the Protectors blazed within him, power and energy and force that could smash suns.

In midair the fiery lance failed and died. The Aesir drew back a step, drawing its cloak about it

as if in surprise. And Kari--Kari shrank back, too, and something strangely like hope flashed for a moment across her dazzling, her more than mortal loveliness. Hope? But she was of the Aesir now. And if they failed, she died. Then why--

The Aesir's cloak flickered, and a second gush of fiery light fountained toward Stuart.

Up surged the tide of power in him again. Blind and dazed with his own tremendous energy, Stuart felt a curve like a dim shield flung up to meet that lance. The Aesir's fire struck--and flashed into blazing fragments on the Protector's shield. Each droplet sang intolerable music as it faded and winked out. And behind the Aesir, more dazzling than any immortal fire had been, Stuart saw Kari's sudden, shining smile. . . .

She would die if the Aesir failed. She must know she would die. But the brilliance of her smile struck him as the Aesir's spear of fire could never strike. He knew, then. He understood. . . .

The Aesir's cloak whirled like a storm-cloud, in dark, deep billows. The Aesir itself grew taller for a moment, as if it drew itself up to a godlike height. And then it did for Derek Stuart what no Aesir had ever done for a mortal man before. No Aesir had ever needed to. It cast off the hampering cloak and stood stripped for battle with this primitive manling whose forebears immemorially long ago had been the Aesir's forebears. There was in that stripping something almost of kinship--an acknowledgment that here at last in the hall of the Aesir stood an equal, sprung of equal stock. . . .

Naked in its terrible power, the Aesir stood up to face the man.

Not human. Not ever human, except in the mysterious basics which these people of a thousand millenniums in the future had chosen to retain. The flesh they had cast off, and the flesh the Aesir stood up in to face his forebear was pure, blazing, blinding energy. Twice as tall as a man it stood, shining with supernal brilliance, terrible and magnificent.

The great hall rang soundlessly with the power of the Protectors.

And then from above a streak of light came flashing, and another, and another. And were engulfed in the one Aesir who stood shining before its adversary, growing ever brighter and more terrible. The rest of the Aesir, coming to the aid of their fellow, forming a single entity to crush the champion of mankind.

Stuart braced himself for the incredible torrent of energy that would come blasting through him from the Protectors. And in a split second--it came!

Mind and body reeled beneath the impact of that power as force flared through him and struck out at the tower of lightning which was the Aesir. But the force which was trying his human body to its utmost was not force enough to touch that blinding column. Energy lashed out from it, struck him a reeling blow--Stuart dropped to his knees, the hall swimming in fire around him.

But what he saw was not the terrible, blazing image of his adversary, but Kari's face beyond. His falling meant her life--but when she saw him go down the brilliance dimmed upon her features. The hope he had seen there went out like a candle-flame and she was once more only a vessel of human flesh which the Aesir had possessed and degraded.

In his despair and his dizziness he cried soundlessly, "Help me, Protectors! Give me your power!"

The still double-voice said, "You could not hold it. You would be burned out utterly."

"I'll hold it long enough!" he promised desperately. "One second of power--only that! Enough to smash the Aesir. Then death--but not till then!"

There was one instant when time stopped. That cataclysmic horror that

had risen a thousand years ago and raged through the worlds like a holocaust stood blazing before Stuart's eyes. It stooped toward him, poising for the hammer blow that would smash him to nothing--

Then a power like the drive of galaxies through space thundered into Stuart's mind.

He had not expected this. Nothing in human experience could have taught him to expect it. For the Protectors were not human. No more human than the Aesir themselves. And the unleashed energy that roared soundlessly through Stuart rocked his very soul on its foundations. He could not stir. He could not think. He could only stay upon his knees facing the Aesir-thing as galactic power thundered through him and wielded him like a sword against man's enemies.

Higher and higher rose the crashing tides of contest. The citadel shook ponderously open upon the rocks of the god-made little world. Perhaps that world itself staggered in space as the titans battled together on its rocking surface.

Faster spun the core of radiant light which was the Aesir. Faster raced the tides of power through Stuart's blasted body, seeming to rip his very flesh apart and blaze in his brain like hammers of cosmic fire.

Terribly, terribly he yearned for surcease, for the end of this unthinkable destruction that was tearing his brain and body apart. And he knew he could end it in a moment, if he chose to let go. . . .

Grimly he clung to the power that was destroying him. Second by second, counting each moment an eternity, he clung to consciousness. The crashing lanches of the Protectors drove on upon the armor of the Aesir, and the cyclopean pillars of the great hall reeled upon their foundations, and the very air blazed into liquid fire around him.

He never knew what final blow of cosmic violence ended that battle. But suddenly, without warning, the vast column of the Aesir pulsed with violent brilliance and the whole hall rang with a cry too shrill and terrible for ears or the very mind to hear, except as a thrilling of despair.

The tower rocked. All the bright tapestries billowed and flowed against the walls. And the radiant thing that was the Aesir--

Went out like a blown flame. Stuart saw it darken in the quickness of a heartbeat from blinding brightness to an angry, sullen scarlet, and then to the color of embers, and then to darkness.

There was nothing there at all.

And Stuart's brain dimmed with it. One last glimpse he had of the shining smile on Kari's face, triumph and delight, in the instant before the cloudiness of oblivion blotted her features out.

He was not dead. Somewhere, far away, his body lay prone upon the cold pavement of the Aesir's hall, a hall terribly empty now of life. But Stuart himself hung in empty space, somewhere between life and death.

The thought of the Protectors touched him gently, almost caressingly.

"You are a mighty man, Derek Stuart. Your name shall not be forgotten while mankind lives."

With infinite effort he roused his mind.

"Kari--" he said.

There was silence for a moment--a warm silence. But the voices, speaking as one, said gently, "Have you forgotten? When the Aesir died, Kari died too. And you, Derek Stuart --you can never go back to your body now. You remember that?"

Sudden rebellion shook Stuart's bodiless brain. "Get out of my mind!" he raged at the double voice. "What do you know about human beings? I've won for mankind--but what did I win for myself? Nothing--nothing!

And Kari-- Get out of my mind and let me die! What do you know about love?"

Amazingly, laughter pulsed softly.

"Love?" said the double voice. "Love? You have not guessed who we are?"

Stuart's bewildered mind framed only a voiceless question.

"We know humanity," the twin voices said. "We were human once, a thousand years ago. Very human, Derek Stuart. And we remembered love."

He half guessed the answer. "You are--"

"There was a man and a woman once," the voices told him gently. "Mankind still remembers their legend--John Starr and Lorna, who defied the Aesir."

"John Starr and Lorna!"

"We fought the Aesir in the days when we and they were human. We worked with them on the entropy device that made them what they are now--and made us--ourselves. When we saw what they planned with their power, we fought. . . . But they were five, and strong because they were ruthless. We had to flee."

The voices that spoke as one voice were distant, remembering.

"They grew in power on their Asgard world, changing as the millenniums swept over them, as entropy accelerated for them. And we changed, too, in our own place, in our different way. We are not human now. But we are not monsters, as the Aesir were. We have known failure and bitterness and defeat many times, Derek Stuart. But we remember humanity. And as for love--"

Stuart said bitterly:

"You know your love. You have it forever. But Kari . . . Kari is dead."

The voices were very gentle. "You have sacrificed more than we. You gave up your love and your bodies. We--"

Silence again. Then the woman, serene and gentle-voiced, "There is a way, John. But not an easy one--for us."

Stuart thought, "But Kari is dead."

The woman said, "Her body is empty of the Aesir life-force. And yours is burned out by the power we poured through it, so that no human could live in it again unless--unless one more than human upheld you."

"Lorna--"

"We must part for awhile, John. We have been one for a long while. Now we must be two again, for the sake of these two. Until the change. . . ."

"What change?" asked Stuart eagerly.

"As we changed, so would you, if our lives upheld yours. Entropy would move for you as it moved for the Aesir and for us. And that, too, I think, is good. Mankind will need a leader. And we can help--John and I--more surely if we taste again of humanity. After awhile--after millenniums--the circle will close and John and I will be free to merge again. And you and Kari, too."

Stuart thought, "But Kari--will it be Kari?"

"It will be," the gentle voice said. "Cleansed of the evil of the Aesir, supported by my own strength, as you by John's. You will be yourselves again, with the worlds before you, and afterward--a dwelling among the stars, with us. . . ."

The man's voice said, "Lorna, Lorna--"

"You know we must, beloved," the softer voice said. "We have asked too much of them to offer nothing in repayment. And it will not be goodbye."

There was darkness and silence.

Stuart was dimly aware of cyclopean heights rising above him. Painfully he stirred. He was clothed in his own body again, and the battle-blasted hall of the dead Aesir towered high into the dimness above him.

He turned his head.

Beside him on the dais a girl, lying crumpled in the shower of her hair, stirred and sighed.

Lin Carter's "Ghosts of Ganymede" displayed all the qualities that have always made his science fiction tales my favorites among his works: his imaginative construction of the "everyday" aspects of the future, like religion, technology, and economics, coupled with a wonderful feel for the pace and dynamics of good old pulp fiction! Keep 'em coming, Captain Lin!

Jerry Fielding
Forest Hills, NY

Frank Long's presence in your magazine gives it the authentic pedigree of a real SF pulp! I was tickled to see his "The Soaring" in your first issue, but was dismayed not to find a follow-up in #2. Imagine my delight at devouring Long's "Sauce for the Gander"! Still, I would like to see some real space opera from Mr. Long. Hey, how about a new "John Carstairs, Space Detective" tale?

Sal Venezia
Philadelphia, PA

I think I have discovered just who the real "Star Pirate" around this magaizne is! I thought Lin Carter's "Corsairs of the Cosmos" [Astro-Adventures #2] sounded familiar, so I looked through Bob Weinberg's The Weird Tales Story where, sure enough, I found the title illo for Edmond Hamilton's "Corsairs of the Cosmos"! I guess when you've read as much as Mr. Carter has, you sooner or later stop remembering what you've read and what you've written!

Bill Mendel
Sioux City, IA

My favorite story in Astro-Adventures #3 has to be Jacobi's "Nebula and the Necklace," partly because the tale itself is a good pulpish rouser, but partly for the quaintness of the 30's atmosphere. It's a riot to see the little features of life in a writer's own day that he thought would carry over into the distant future! But that's just the charm of these stories! Don't change a thing!

Helen Brady
Los Angeles, CA

Mr. Comtois is very versatile indeed! Haven't I seen him represented in recent issues of Shudder Stories, Cromlech, and who knows what else? Tell him to keep up the good work. Jacobi, Carter, and Long were superlative as usual, needless to say.

Lenny Pickett
Raleigh, NC